

Dark horse candidate for PM8?

The air is thick with talk of an alternative succession plan, even as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim moves swiftly to take down a potential rival for the top job.

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

EVERYTHING about the succession plan for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to move up appears to be in place, yet so little about it seems to be for sure.

Even Anwar himself seemed a little uncertain, going by the way he went for "Sembrong" during debate time in Parliament.

Sembrong is the parliamentary seat of former defence minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein.

The PKR president had basically accused the Sembrong MP of being part of a plot to sabotage the succession plan.

Anwar, in not so many words, was implying that something is cooking behind the scenes. The political animal in him could sense danger ahead.

He obviously regarded Hishammuddin as a "serious threat" given the way he attacked him, implying that the former minister was doing this for personal survival and to escape investigation and prosecution.

A few hours later, the Pakatan Harapan secretariat issued a strong statement, slamming Hishammuddin for trying to form a backdoor government that excludes DAP and Amanah.

They also accused him of promot-

ing racial politics in his article that was widely published last Sunday, although it was actually about why the country deserves better and that the future of Malaysia has to be multiracial.

It has been a very confusing week in Malaysian politics and when Hishammuddin bumped into Mohamad Sabu in Parliament on Wednesday, he teased the Amanah president: "What is this that I am trying to exclude Amanah?"

The pair had no chance to chat as a media frenzy immediately formed around them.

But an hour later, Mat Sabu posted pictures of himself and Hishammuddin on all his social media platforms - Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

That only added fuel to the fire of speculation. Was Mat Sabu trying to say he is with Hishammuddin?

There is a reason why Pakatan is bashing Hishammuddin and naming him as the hidden hands behind what is seen as an alternative succession plan.

Anwar, whose supporters refer to him as PM8 (8th prime minister), probably wanted to nip any likely plot in the bud.

Whispers of an alternative succession plan that excludes Anwar have

been circulating for several weeks.

This is despite Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad proclaiming Anwar as his successor. He has said it so many times - at home and abroad - yet the doubts linger on.

The other thing is that Hishammuddin meets Dr Mahathir almost as often as Anwar does.

Anwar meets regularly with the Prime Minister in his Putrajaya office and tweets about it, whereas Hishammuddin goes to Dr Mahathir's Country Heights home and does not tweet about it.

Hishammuddin's ties with Dr Mahathir remains a matter of speculation, but it is certainly warmer and closer than that of any other Umno figure at this point in time.

The former Umno vice-president had aligned himself to Dr Mahathir right from the start and although he denies it, he is believed to have been instrumental in the crossovers of Umno MPs to Bersatu.

Hishammuddin made it clear in an interview that "No way I will ever leave Umno". He has also not been sitting around twiddling his thumbs over the past year.

Just weeks after Barisan Nasional fell, he set up office in Ampang, which became some sort of base for Umno politicians, who were then

lost and looking for answers.

The office has since grown and is staffed by bright, young Malays who monitor the political situation, and there is now a second office that does research and analysis.

It is almost like a parallel version of Anwar's political hub in Jalan Gasing.

Hints of a possible alternative transition plan grew clearer after the controversial Malay Dignity Congress, which saw Malay leaders from opposite sides of the political divide sharing the stage in the name of Malay unity.

Hishammuddin was a rather awkward guest at the Malay gathering, but he admitted: "If you look at the people on the stage (at the congress), they have enough numbers to form the government."

It was basically a Malay show of force and numbers, and the fact that Anwar was not there was quite troubling.

It was good in the sense that his multiracial ideals remained untarnished. But it was troubling because it means that Anwar does not command the Malay base.

Malays make up more than 60% of the population and a strong prime minister also has to be a strong Malay leader who can control the

Malay ground.

Hishammuddin has suddenly been catapulted into the limelight, although it remains a mystery how he can progress to something bigger given that he is currently an Opposition MP and his only party position is Sembrong Umno division chief.

But a political insider said what happens in May next year - the expected transition date - will depend on "the numbers".

The implication is that although the succession will be a collective decision by the Pakatan leadership, Anwar may need to show that he has the numbers in terms of MPs.

"You think Anwar would not have made his move by now if he already has the numbers?" asked the insider.

But Anwar has moved to strike down any would-be rivals.

The prime minister-in-waiting is not going to push Dr Mahathir off the stage, but he has shown that he will not hesitate to defend his turf against those he views as pretenders to the throne.

The power play will intensify in the coming months.

The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of *The Star*.