

Muhyiddin's crucial Parliament Speaker test

Perikatan's moment of truth comes tomorrow in Parliament and, hopefully, it will settle the numbers game. *The Star - 12/7/2020*



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Making his move: Some political observers say the fact that he is pushing to replace the Speaker and Deputy Speaker shows that the Prime Minister is confident he has enough support in Parliament. — Filepic

“PERIKATAN Nasional has more than 116 MPs. We will win the vote to remove the Dewan Rakyat Speaker and Deputy Speaker,” a Perikatan Nasional politician told me over dinner in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday.

The politician was referring to Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's two motions, to remove Speaker Tan Sri Mohd Ariff Md Yusof and Deputy Speaker Nga Kor Ming.

On that day, Perikatan had 114 MPs: Umno 39, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia 32, Gabungan Parti Sarawak 18 (PBB 13, PRS two, PDP two and SUPP one), PAS 18, MCA two, MIC one, Sabah STAR one, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah one, Parti Bersatu Sabah one and Lubok Antu MP one. The Opposition had 108 MPs: Pakatan Harapan 91 MPs (DAP 42, PKR 38 and Amanah 11, Parti Warisan Sabah nine, ex Bersatu five, Parti Sarawak Bersatu two and Upko one.

The politician told me that there are “sleeper” Opposition MPs who will support the Perikatan Government at the next sitting of Parliament.

“I'll give you a hint. Some of them were aligned with Team Azmin when he was with PKR,” he said, referring to former PKR deputy president and Gombak MP Datuk Seri Azmin Ali who is now with Bersatu.

However, Malaysian politics is fluid and messy.

The next day, my source's “more than 116” number was reduced by one.

Former Bersatu MPs issued a press statement that they would be sticking to their decision to support Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Shafie Apdal as Prime Minister and not Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. The joint statement was signed by Langkawi MP Dr Mahathir, his son Jerlun MP Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir, Muar MP Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, Simpang Renggam MP Dr Mazleez Malik, Kubang Pasu MP Datuk Amiruddin Hamzah and, surprise, surprise ... Sri Gading MP Datuk Dr Shahrudin Md Salleh.

On June 4, Dr Shahrudin quit as deputy works minister. He, however, announced that he would remain as a Perikatan backbencher MP.

It is now official that the Sri Gading MP is with Team Mahathir and the Opposition. So Perikatan's number is now 113 (plus sleeper Opposition MPs).

Tomorrow, Parliament begins sitting for 25 days.

Will Muhyiddin be able to push for his Speaker and Deputy Speaker candidates? Will it be explosive?

“I do expect the parliamentary meeting to be rather explosive especially with emotions still riding high due to the betrayal of certain MPs who were in the Pakatan government before,” said Bandar Kuching MP Kelvin Yii of DAP, adding that the manner in which Perikatan came to power would also add to the tension.

Yii said the situation would be exacerbated by the tabling of the highly divisive motion to replace the Speaker and Deputy Speaker. He said on paper, Perikatan seemed to have the numbers but this has not yet been tested on the floor.

“So it will only be truly seen on the day itself, and it's not just about how many vote for it (the motions), but also how many turn up for the vote,” he said.

Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Ahmad Maslan expects the voting to replace the Speaker and Deputy Speaker to be engaging. The Pontian MP, however, believes that the candidates nominated by the Prime Minister will win.

PBRS deputy president Arthur Joseph Kurup believes that the government has the numbers.

“It is not a ‘sacking’, as you put it. If Perikatan does proceed then it is to put in a Speaker who is chosen by the majority of the House to facilitate the orders of the government, which is crucial to be an effective government,” said the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Economy) and Pensiangan MP.

Universiti Malaya political analyst Dr Muhammad Asri Mohd Ali contended that the motions are closely related to the survival of the Perikatan government.

If it doesn't get the votes for the motions, he said, it means that the Prime Minister does not command a majority in Parliament and would have to resign immediately.

On the Opposition side, Muhammad Asri noted that they had failed to settle who would be their candidate as Prime Minister. When Dr Mahathir suggested Warisan president and Semporna MP Shafie and not Port Dickson MP Anwar, who is Opposition leader, there was no point for the PKR

president to support the Langkawi MP's initiative, he said.

“Given that scenario, Perikatan will have no problem in changing the Speaker of Parliament,” he said.

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia politics and governance research group head Dr Mazlan Ali agrees that if Pagoh MP Muhyiddin does not have the numbers, pushing for the motion to replace the Mohd Ariff and Nga would be a suicidal act. That he is pushing for it means the Prime Minister is confident he has the numbers, said Dr Mazlan.

He pointed out that the relationship between the two foremost leaders on the Opposition bench — Dr Mahathir and Anwar — is tense.

“At the moment, the Opposition can't prove that they have the numbers. There's a possibility that Muhyiddin will pass the test,” he said.

Will Umno, which seems to have a love-hate relationship with Bersatu, spring a surprise in Parliament tomorrow?

Ahmad Maslan doesn't think so.

“Umno MPs have already agreed to support the PN Government and TSMY (Muhyiddin),” he said.

Muhammad Asri agrees.

“For the time being, Umno realises they need to be in government; they are not trained as the Opposition. Without the present coalition, they are still on the Opposition bench.

“And Umno cannot afford to go into GE15 alone, and no single political party has ever ruled Malaysia in the past, they need a coalition,” he said.

Mazlan thinks otherwise.

“There is a possibility that there might be sabotage as Umno is divided into two factions. One faction wants Perikatan to remain as government and the other wants snap polls,” he said.

Yii said the motions to remove the Speaker and Deputy Speaker would be a litmus test for the government in terms of support and a barometer of unity for both the government and the Opposition.

“The dissent in some quarters of the Opposition is well known but there is also growing dissent among Perikatan lawmakers especially those from Umno,” he said.

Muhyiddin's moment of truth comes tomorrow; we'll know whether his government has the numbers.