

# Muhyiddin thriving amid chaos, challenges



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**D**URING a recent morning coffee-shop chatter I had on the state of national politics with two Sarawak Chinese friends, the usual tone critical of the government took a surprising turn.

Apparently turned off by the seemingly incessant politicking even as the nation faces grave dangers posed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, one guy — a successful 60-something professional — blurted out, unprompted, that he thought Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was doing a reasonably good job and that he was mystified what all the political squabbling was for or about.

To be sure, the untested Muhyiddin — whom few Malaysians had thought was prime minister material — had greatness thrust upon him at the most difficult time in the nation's history.

Yet, one year hence, he seems to not only thrive, but — if the latest public polls are to be believed — also demonstrated that his high personal popularity ratings are consistent and durable.

How to explain all this? Firstly, I suppose in times of crisis, there is an understandable public yearning for reassuring leadership which, to the surprise of many, Muhyiddin seems able to project in spades. Amid all the seeming chaos and the challenges — not least by almost all other key political personalities taking pot-shots at his expense — the prime minister looks unperturbed.

His public persona, rather artfully cultivated, radiates amiable, even transcendental calm as he quite effortlessly stays above the fray. As well, it helps to come into the national spotlight with low or

even no public expectations of what one brings along, let alone what one can deliver.

Yet, even with a precarious hold on political power from the very start, Muhyiddin gives every indication that his lengthy career in politics — first as Johor menteri besar and then in a string of consequential federal cabinet portfolios — had all been incremental if inobtrusive preparations for the day he reached the pinnacle of national leadership.

He proved his parliamentary majority (albeit wafer-thin), got the national budget passed, unveiled a string of stimulus packages to tide over our pandemic-ravaged economy, flipped Sabah politically his way and even managed to act statesman-like on the international stage with official trips to Jakarta (twice, the latest to commiserate with fellow Asean leaders on the Myanmar crisis), Brunei, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Along the way, Muhyiddin did what his mentor-turned-adversary, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, surely ought to be proud of: that

in the do-or-die battle for survival that is Malaysian politics and with all the gloves coming off your opponents, one should give as good as one gets in the ceaseless hunt for parliamentary numbers, showing off some Machiavellian chops in the process.

Which brings us to how and where the best-laid political succession planning gone awry over and over under Dr Mahathir has now landed us politically: in pretty good hands actually, given the circumstances.

It should not be so surprising, really. A case of political karma such as Muhyiddin's — the deputy sacrificed on account of his boss's snowballing scandal coming back to claim the top job himself — ought to play well in voters' minds.

The big question now is whether the prime minister can convert all these pluses into the ultimate prize that really counts: a convincing electoral mandate of his own that will banish the current rough patch of political uncertainty for good.

Muhyiddin must not only re-

tain, but also improve on his popularity ratings as well as work on winning over the Chinese electorate, which remains rather sceptical about him. Can he achieve in particular the latter?

There has been a precedent in how Dr Mahathir turned the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990's and the political damage he incurred with the sacking of his then deputy into a winning opportunity.

His handling of the crisis was vindicated and a grateful electorate, especially economically-literate Chinese voters, returned him to power handsomely.

Ever the pragmatists, will Chinese voters now decide that Muhyiddin has proven probably the safest bet for a return to political stability so critical to post-pandemic economic health, come the next general election?

The writer views developments in the nation, region and wider world from his vantage point in Kuching, Sarawak