

# Bossku, Umno's biggest influencer

Najib's clout is not so much within Umno where the divisional warlords still hold the cards, but over the Malay base that the party needs to survive. *The Star - 25/7/2021 pg. 9*

By JOCELINE TAN

THERE must have been a rush of old, familiar feelings when Datuk Seri Najib Razak stepped into the office of the Deputy Prime Minister on Wednesday.

The man, known as Bossku, was there to pay a courtesy call on Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob who is settling into his new job as the country's No 2, a job that Najib held for five years.

Najib had on a wildly colourful batik shirt, reminiscent of the gaudy shirts that Ismail Sabri was famous for during his TV Covid-19 briefings as Senior Minister.

The wifie they took, seated in overstuffed armchairs, was yet another one of those pictures that says a thousand words.

It denoted a generational shift in the politics of Umno and, more significant, the role that Najib now plays in the party.

Ismail Sabri had called on Najib before and after his appointment.

The first was to inform Najib, the second, to pay respect to his former president. And now, it was the former prime minister's turn to accord the same courtesy to the new DPM.

Malay politics involves so much flowery back and forth but it must never be underestimated.

For Ismail Sabri, having Najib's support is an important validation because there are still rumblings within Umno about him accepting the high post.

Najib is basically telling his party that Ismail Sabri, who now holds

the most important government post among the Umno leaders, has his blessings.

"Najib has a big voice. You can still win posts in Umno without his support, but you will have problems if he disapproves of you," said Umno supreme council member Datuk Seri Sharkar Shamsudin.

Many thought the Bossku phenomenon would die off after the pandemic struck.

They thought Najib would be grounded and unable to go here and there, sampling hawker food, taking wiefies and expanding his fan base.

But he turned his focus on social media and his Facebook page has become the go-to place for up-to-date opinions and information on politics, socio-economic issues, the pandemic, plus lots of witty pokes at opponents who fumble.

For instance, Najib recently extended a tongue-in-cheek welcome to Muar MP Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman to the "Kluster Mahkamah".

He joked that when he heard that an ex-minister would be charged with corruption, he thought it would be an ex-PKR minister tainted with a RM78mil graft scandal or a couple of ex-Umno MPs who had reportedly jumped ship to avoid prosecution.

"No one wanted to be associated with him after the 2018 general election but he reinvented himself as the chief critic of Pakatan Harapan. Now he is the chief critic of Perikatan Nasional.

"He played a big part in unravelling the Pakatan government and its failure to understand and manage Malay sentiments," said lawyer and political columnist Ivanpal S. Grewal.

The Bossku phenomenon began during the 2019 Cameron Highlands by-election and gathered steam from one by-election to the next. His rise also coincided with the downhill slide of Pakatan's political fortunes.

There was a vacuum in Malay leadership - then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had turned out to be a toothless tiger and Najib used his Facebook persona to step into the void.

And all this happened as Najib was going in and out of court for his corruption trial.

His hardcore supporters fantasise about a comeback but the corruption charges hung over his head like the sword of Damocles.

It will be difficult to detoxify his image.

The memory of the 1Malaysia Development Bhd scandal, the excesses of Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor and the exploits of Jho Low will follow him forever.

But none of that seems to deter his fan base. His birthday on Friday drew 74,000 likes on Facebook while his video, thanking well-wishers, garnered 49,000 likes.

"He is a formidable player despite his legal troubles. He's found a niche in our muddled political landscape to become the main spokesperson for the rakyat. He has been

able to channel the raw sentiments of the rakyat in a simple and, at times, colloquial way," said Ivanpal.

And that is what the Bossku phenomenon is about. Strip away the gimmicky touches, the occasional playing to the gallery, the rib-tickling wit, and it is apparent that what Najib is doing on social media is articulating issues affecting the people and the country in a way that no other political leader has been able to.

His fan base, especially the fanatical ones, are almost entirely Malay.

"But many Chinese corporate figures now say that Najib created a more level playing field for them to do business," said former Kajang assemblyman Lee Chin Cheh.

A Penang lawyer, who is an adviser to Dong Zong, said the Chinese educationist group had also reluctantly acknowledged that Najib was more open-minded than Dr Mahathir and had made accorded concessions to Chinese schools.

Pakatan leaders have made a beeline to meet him. A top PAS leader met him last month to ask him to help ensure that the Muafakat Nasional alliance between PAS and Umno goes on.

"He told us he will not give up on cooperating with PAS. We reminded him that he was the first Umno leader to reach out to us," said Selangor PAS secretary Roslan Shahrir.

Shortly before the King met with the leaders of political parties, Pakatan despatched a top Amanah leader to see Najib.

More recently, a DAP strategist is said to have also met up with Najib for discussions.

"The softening in sentiment does not mean that people want him back. I see him as a powerful broker behind the scene," said the Penang lawyer.

Najib reminds people of a time when Malaysia was mocked as "Boleh land" where outrageous things happened, but he also represents a time when there was greater political stability and people felt more assured about the future.

Ivanpal said Najib could be a father figure in Umno because he had stayed loyal through the party's ups and downs.

"He can be a kingmaker, which is sometimes more powerful than being the leader. You are not constrained by rules, you can speak out, move about freely," said Ivanpal.

Najib has grown into a powerful influencer. His clout is not so much within Umno where the divisional warlords still hold the cards, but over the Malay base that Umno needs to survive.

Whoever can sway the hearts and minds of the Malays will hold sway over Umno.

But winning in the court of public opinion is the easy part. Can Najib win in the court of law?

His fate and role as an influencer and kingmaker lies in the hands of the courts.

**The views expressed here are the writer's own.**