

A testing first 100 days for PM

The Star - 5/9/2021 pg. 7

Analysis by Joceline Tan

THE political temperature has gone down after months of intense politicking.

Everyone is taking a breather until the next showdown when Parliament meets on Sept 13.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob is quarantined at home from where he chaired a Cabinet meeting via Zoom.

His Facebook page showed him dressed for work in a dark suit and striped tie and seated before a mounted TV.

But some were more intrigued by the rather eclectic decor of his "home office" with its makeshift desk, orange carpet, cushions on the floor and family portraits on the colourful tiled wall.

It was not posh or fancy like the workspaces of rich and powerful people and as one young Umno politician from Kelantan noted, "That is Ismail Sabri for you, the room speaks of his simple ways. He is very grounded as a person, still the same man we knew from back then."

But Umno's "kampung man" has managed to strike a temporary truce with the Opposition.

Political commentator Khaw Veon Szu said the way Ismail Sabri and top Pakatan Harapan leadership reached out to each other last week had a lot to do with the cooler mood.

Khaw said the picture of Pakatan leaders in the Prime Minister's office sent out a powerful signal.

At one level, it was about the two sides respecting the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's advice to

The political ceasefire may not last long and this period could be a dangerous journey or a golden opportunity for him to survive.

cooperate on issues.

At another level, it was an acknowledgement that Ismail Sabri is now the Prime Minister.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had failed to secure the numbers and it was time to stop playing politics.

"You'd be surprised how many people were convinced that Pakatan would be back in power. When news broke that Ismail Sabri was the new PM, some of my friends thought it was fake news," said Khaw.

That was the extent to which some people chose to believe what they wanted and to ignore reality.

Ismail Sabri's 100-day journey has begun and it could be the most important 100 days of his political career.

He has asked his Cabinet to show results within that period and hinted at a reshuffle if the ministers do not deliver.

"He has set a difficult goal for himself. Evaluating a government after 100 days is a convention but why set it in concrete?" said political risk analyst Datuk Wan Shihab Wan Ismail.

He said it is difficult to fathom how the ministers are going to do things differently given that it is essentially the same Cabinet.

The more cynical have labelled Ismail Sabri's administration as an Umno prime minister and a Muhyiddin cabinet presiding over a Perikatan Nasional government.

"Evaluating a government after 100 days is a convention but why set it in concrete?"

Datuk Wan Shihab Wan Ismail

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin had a big say in the composition of the Cabinet and Ismail Sabri will need to show that the former premier is no longer a force behind the curtains.

"On the plus side, he is coming in with low expectations and that can be an opportunity to prove his critics wrong. It is an extraordinary time to be a leader and he did in fact secure the numbers after months of instability.

"What the PM can do is show a different style of leadership. Go down to the ground, be hands-on, engage with people and groups. Come across as a hardworking PM even if his Cabinet appears less so.

"Avoid the mistakes of Muhyiddin who was not visible enough and

who preferred to connect through TV telecasts," said Wan Shihab.

There is now discussion about whether the vote of confidence in Parliament is still necessary, given that Ismail Sabri has been sworn in.

The confidence vote idea came from the King and those in the government do not want to be seen as not heeding the King's request.

Everyone is tip-toeing around the palace these days after the way Muhyiddin fell from grace.

Mentris Besar have fallen after stepping on the toes of their Sultans but this was the first time a prime minister had fallen after incurring royal displeasure.

Validating his numbers in Parliament would strengthen Ismail Sabri's hold on power.

But this is Malaysian politics where anything is possible. Those around him are nervous that things could go wrong as a result of MPs falling ill or testing positive for Covid-19 on the big day.

The Pakatan side is not exactly itching for a vote either. They have lost the numbers game and it would be embarrassing to have it confirmed by a headcount before the whole country.

Besides, Pakatan is also at a crossroads of its own.

The coalition is intact, but there are tensions and PKR politicians complain that they can feel "hidden knives" wherever they turn.

Anwar's leadership has been under pressure after coming so close yet so far from the premiership.

The next general election will be his last chance for a shot at the top job. But he has nothing to be ashamed of.

"He led a movement that resulted in a more democratic Malaysia. It's a valuable legacy," said Khaw.

Wan Shihab said it would be folly to underestimate Pakatan's ability to come back.

"It was astute of Anwar to immediately ask his supporters to prepare for the general election because they would only lose popularity if they continued to focus on the numbers and legitimacy of the government," said Wan Shihab.

The above Kelantan politician said people should also not underestimate Ismail Sabri.

There are several camps in Umno but none of them dislike him.

"Everyone sees him as a friend. It takes a shrewd politician to not have many enemies in Umno," said the Kelantan politician.

The political ceasefire will not last for long, the temperature will rise again.

Given this, the Prime Minister's first 100 days could either be a dangerous journey or a golden opportunity to survive.

The views expressed here are the writer's own.