

Najib eyeing Umno hot seat

The Star - 26/9/2021 P3.9

Speculation is rife that the former premier wants to make a political comeback and has been sending out feelers to gauge the party's reaction to his plans.

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

SPECULATION that Datuk Seri Najib Razak is planning a political comeback has been swirling for months.

The former premier has been coy about it while the rumour mill churns in Umno.

But the former premier finally spoke about his comeback aspirations in an interview with Reuters, indicating that he intends to defend his seat in Pekan.

Most intriguing was his claim that he would find a way to get around the fact that he may be disqualified from contesting given the string of corruption charges against him.

Are his comeback plans sheer bravado or does he know something that we do not?

Najib has been around long enough to know the election rules. He is appealing a conviction on one of his 1MDB related cases as well as fighting a devastating bankruptcy order, either of which could mess up hopes of a comeback.

Najib has kept busy since his fall and he is said to have several meetings a day, some of which go on till the early hours of the morning.

However, an Umno insider noticed that Najib has been meeting up with more Umno division heads in the last month or so.

"Yes, it's true. Najib wants to come back as Umno president. The intention is there," said a division

leader who attended one of the meetings.

Najib, or Bossku as he is known, is assessing the mood out there.

"He is polished and diplomatic, as always. He would ask us if there is any possibility of him returning to lead the party.

"He wants our opinion on whether there is still support for him," said the division leader.

Najib told them he is not interested in becoming the prime minister again but wants to rebuild the party.

He has also admitted that it all depends on his court cases and he will make a decision when the time comes.

Umno division leaders have also been talking about a "gentlemen's agreement" between Najib and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob or what some refer to as a "division of labour".

Najib will manage Umno while Ismail Sabri manages the country.

This would have been unthinkable a few years ago but so much has changed in politics that many in Umno have come round to the idea that the party president does not always become prime minister.

The assumption is that if Najib goes for the presidency, Ismail Sabri will go for the deputy presidency but remain as the Prime Minister.

It sounds like one of those dream teams except that dreams do not always come true.

Some division leaders claimed

Ismail Sabri is not opposed to the idea. The Umno ladder is more slippery than the staircase to the Prime Minister's office and Ismail Sabri knows it will be tough for anyone to take on Najib if he is eligible for the presidency.

"Bossku is very strong. If he is allowed to contest, I think he will win," said the above division chief.

However, not everyone in Umno is thrilled at the prospect of Najib returning to lead the party.

For instance, a video of Kok Lanas assemblyman Datuk Seri Alwi Che Ahmad urging Umno to move forward has resonated with many in the party.

Alwi, famous for his kampung-style oratory, said the Umno culture is to empathise and show respect for leaders past and present.

He said Malay culture does not condone hitting a man who has fallen, but Umno needs to move on from leaders who are stuck with court cases so that the next generation can rise up.

There is a lot sympathy for Najib within Umno. His supporters believe he is a victim whom Pakatan Harapan paraded as a scapegoat to cover up its inexperience and shortcomings during the 22 months in power.

"I've met so many people who say the country was in better shape under him. In Umno, he is seen as someone who did not run away after we lost. He was out there, taking on Pakatan with facts and fig-

ures," said Port Dickson Umno Youth chief Najib Mohd Isa.

The former Umno president's comeback plan has drawn mixed reactions. Opinions differ between the senior and younger cohorts in Umno as well as those within and outside Umno.

"He has been such a phenomenon after we lost in 2018. He was Mr Opposition and it gave us a big boost.

"However, the political landscape has changed. I don't buy the idea of him steering the party again," said Datuk Harrison Hassan, deputy chief of the Sungai Buloh Umno division.

Harrison is in his forties and those of his generation are more tuned-in to the way the urban electorate view politics, corruption and governance. They are concerned about how this will impact Umno's chances in the general election.

For any party to do well in the polls, it needs support from a cross-section of the electorate, especially now that the voting age is about to be lowered to 18 years.

As some have pointed out, there is immense sympathy for Najib within Umno but that does not mean they want him back in the driver's seat.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's comeback has laid a precedent for political leaders who are past their prime to return.

Pakatan also set some worrying precedents such as appointing a



finance minister who was then in the midst of a corruption trial and seeking a royal pardon for its coalition leader's criminal conviction.

It has emboldened some Umno leaders to argue that, "if they can do it, so can we".

"To lead Umno in today's world, you cannot have that. Having Najib as the president is one thing, but can we win the general election this way?" asked Harrison.

Leaders who overstay hinder renewal in the party and cause resentment. For instance, there are still rumblings in Umno about "expired goods" in the Cabinet.

Najib's comeback intention is certainly there, except that it also seems like a lot of bravado given all those legal cases he is up against.

But Malaysia's political scene has become so hard to predict that it is best to expect the unexpected and to keep an open mind about everything that Bossku does.

The views expressed here are the writer's own.