

Muhyiddin - boon or bane?

He has been called a failed prime minister but is Bersatu ready for someone new at the helm?

Analysis by **JOCELINE TAN**

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad has made a remarkable recovery for someone who almost died a few months ago.

His tongue is still as sharp as a whip and, unfortunately, the whip was aimed at his former ally Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

A “backstabber” and a “failed prime minister” were some of the terms he used on Muhyiddin after a recent meeting between the pair.

It was the first time the two men had sat down to talk since parting ways after the “Sheraton Move” and it was a rather harsh condemnation given that many also view Dr Mahathir as a failed leader.

The Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia president has not publicly responded but a highly-placed party source said it was untrue Muhyiddin asked Dr Mahathir for support to return as the prime minister.

The source said Muhyiddin briefed the party supreme council on Wednesday that the meeting which took place at Dr Mahathir’s residence was pleasant.

They had dinner and spoke for more than two hours during which Muhyiddin presented his case for Parti Pejuang Tanah Air and Bersatu to join hands in the general election.

Based on the outcomes in Melaka and Johor, it was evident that Barisan Nasional had around 40%

support, Perikatan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan had about 20% each while another 20% of voters would probably not bother to vote.

He argued that if the other parties did not come together, Barisan would win by default and he said that he could not understand why Dr Mahathir was so against him when he was doing what the elder man himself had wanted to do.

Muhyiddin also spoke about his track record as prime minister and that, said the source, might have given Dr Mahathir the impression that Muhyiddin was eyeing a return to the top job.

Two vastly different accounts of the same meeting. Who are we to believe?

Muhyiddin’s image has been badly dented by his party’s lame performance in the Johor polls.

The media was already asking if he would resign as the party president on the very night of the Johor election result.

He was very statesmanlike, saying that he was prepared to step down if that was what the Perikatan leadership wanted.

But who is going to bell the cat?

No one in his party would dare suggest that he take a back seat while PAS has become a timid follower rather than a leader.

The loyal clique around Muhyiddin is still telling him that he is more popular than Dr Mahathir or

Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

His former private secretary Datuk Dr Marzuki Mohamad wrote a passionate essay arguing that there was no basis for his boss to step aside.

“Muhyiddin has the stature to hold Perikatan together. He ticks all the boxes to lead Perikatan but he is struggling to get popular support,” said lawyer and Gerakan politician Ivanpal S. Grewal.

Social media opinion has not been kind to him and there have been calls from outside for him to make way.

A lot of it has to do with the fact he has lost his hold over Johor while his role in the fall of the Pakatan government makes him a less than trustworthy figure among Pakatan leaders.

As a result, the task of working out an electoral pact with opposition parties has been delegated to the political bureau which comprises Bersatu’s top 10.

His situation is somewhat like that of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. They have that first among equals type of stature but are unable to amass the popular vote.

“I think he can see the writing on the wall. To continue to be the poster boy like in Melaka and Johor or to come back again like Mahathir, it is not going to work.

“Muhyiddin still has leftover goodwill and influence. He should

use it to manage a smooth transition in his party,” said political commentator Khaw Veon Szu.

Bersatu is not short of candidates to take over.

There is deputy president Datuk Seri Ahmad Faizal Azumu but the Youth and Sports Minister has consistently told people he is not interested in the top post.

If that is the case, the choice lies between International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali and Home Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin. Should Muhyiddin decide to call it a day.

Muhyiddin seems to favour Azmin and had proposed him for the deputy prime minister post during the change of premiership in August but it fell through.

Although Azmin only came into Bersatu in 2020, his supporters said he was also fighting against Barisan in the general election.

Hamzah, on the other hand, was the enemy they were fighting before he crossed over to Bersatu.

However, the Hamzah camp is seen as stronger. The fact that Umno leaders view him as a dangerous figure says a lot.

Hamzah has been quite an exceptional secretary-general; he is a superb organiser who makes things happen and has less baggage.

Muhyiddin has yet to get over the way he was pressured to resign as



prime minister. He felt he was unjustly treated and is still seeking some sort of vindication.

The way Perikatan ran its campaign in Melaka and Johor, it was as if he was still the prime minister or the benevolent “abah” who dished out aid during the lockdown.

He is still trapped in a time warp about Najib and 1MDB whereas the populace has moved on. Political stability and bread and butter issues have overtaken general concerns about corruption and the kleptocrats.

“Muhyiddin is both a boon and bane for his party. He can’t understand why the guy who is called a ‘national embarrassment’ is drawing the crowds and it cuts into him.

“He still sees himself as the one to watch in the event of a hung parliament. I don’t see him caving in or going off willingly. No way,” said Ivanpal.

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