

# Ex-PMs trying to sway voters

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

TIMING is important in politics and it seemed like Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin's timing has been somewhat off.

The former premier tested positive for Covid-19 a day after the National Recovery Council, of which he is chairman, proposed the reopening of all international borders by March 1.

Although the business community loved the idea, not everyone was jumping for joy given that the proposal came as the Omicron variant is surging in Malaysia.

Muhyiddin's intention to reopen borders also seemed targeted at the March 12 Johor election where Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia is struggling to stay afloat.

The Johor economy is closely tied up with Singapore and Muhyiddin's proposal was likely aimed at winning the hearts and minds of Johoreans and to enable those working across the Causeway to return to vote.

He would have been able to claim the credit had it not been shot down by the Prime Minister.

His nemesis Datuk Seri Najib Razak was among the first to react with a cynical query on Facebook: "Just asking, is Omicron a danger or not?"

At the same time, barely minutes after news broke about Muhyiddin testing positive for Covid-19, Najib wished him "speedy recovery and good health".

That is the beauty of Malay poli-

## Three former prime ministers are running down each other while doing their utmost to influence the thinking of Johor voters.'

tics. They fight like wild cats but the blows soften at times of illness, death or tragedy.

The Johor election has become the boxing ring for the three former prime ministers to slug it out.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Muhyiddin are not on good terms but they have been going at Najib, running him down as a corrupt and convicted man and attacking Umno as lacking morals and shame in supporting him.

Najib certainly has big enemies.

Dr Mahathir is a shadow of his old self but his first political missive after recovering from surgery was to slam Najib as "pencuri Melayu Islam", that is, a Malay Muslim thief.

He said those who supported Najib and kissed his hand were shameless.

The irony is that all three have baggage. Najib is tainted, Dr Mahathir's ratings are at rock bottom while Muhyiddin is being painted as a traitor.

Pakatan Harapan is greatly dependent on Chinese votes to do well and the leaders have been using Najib as a bogeyman, telling their Chinese base that a big win for Barisan Nasional in Johor will pave the way for Najib to come back to

lead Umno or even the country.

Such arguments might work because people do not relish the idea of Najib and his wife returning to public life.

But so much has changed in the last few years. The anger has died down and disappointment has set in.

Politics has become so conflicted for the Chinese. The man whom they placed their faith in to bring about change betrayed them, whereas life was actually better under the man they condemned as a kleptocrat.

Many, including the Chinese, admit it was easier to do business and make a living when Najib was prime minister.

By and large, the opinion out there is that the three former prime ministers are not part of the future.

"This is not an easy election for anyone. You have thousands of new and young voters whose concerns are jobs, housing and wages.

"You think they care about Muhyiddin or about Najib's problems? Young voters are thinking of themselves and their own future," said Pengerang MP Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said.

Azalina said her own political priorities are to have a strong and stable government that is able to

make decisions so that issues such as land and development in Penawar and Tanjung Surat, which are the state seats in Pengerang, can be addressed.

"Muhyiddin brought a lot of development when he was mentri besar of Johor but now, there is little he can bring to the table nor is there anyone in his party capable of bringing change or development to the state.

"I don't want to say much about Dr Mahathir. I personally find him to be a lovely, old man but the game is over, let him rest and recover," said Azalina.

The Opposition's attempt to scare voters by talking of a Najib comeback seems to suggest it is short of issues to play up.

Najib has lost his graft case at the Court of Appeal while the High Court judge who found him guilty was recently promoted.

He is not even eligible to defend his Pekan seat if a general election is held anytime soon.

"Najib is in Johor because he is a party man. He wants us to win. This is a state election. The situation is not like in 2018. The Opposition is making a mistake to target him," said Umno supreme council member Datuk Seri Mohd

Sharkar Shamsudin.

The Johor election, said Sharkar, is not about Najib or Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

"The poster boy in Johor is Hasni (Datuk Hasni Mohammad). It is about giving Hasni a credible mandate to manage the state," said Sharkar, who is also Lanchang assemblyman.

Najib does seem more popular than Dr Mahathir or Muhyiddin and there was a flood of requests from his Facebook friends for him to visit their kampung and even their homes when he was in Johor earlier this week.

Najib felt the pulse of the people when he met and mingled with businessmen, fishermen, small traders, farmers and students in Johor.

"I have been listening. I understand all of you want stability and leaders who are able to drive development in the state. It is about jobs and earnings," he said.

Pakatan has not given up taking back Johor but it needs to do more than beat the drum and shout about corruption and Najib.

They need to convince Johor voters that they can bring stability and progress to the state.

The last few years have been an exhausting time for Johoreans.

They want less quarrelling, less politicking and more efforts on rebuilding the economy.

The views expressed here are the writer's own.