

More trouble ahead for the PM

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

THE rumour was so convincing that journalists scrambled to write about it.

The Cabinet reshuffle rumour swirled like a sandstorm until Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob denied it.

A source close to the centre of power said one of the first persons to call the Prime Minister about it was Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Muhyiddin was naturally concerned because among the names touted to be dropped were Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia ministers who were labelled "*kayu buruk*" (dead wood) by a leading Malay daily.

"This reshuffle story is out of tune with what people are going through. Forget about politics for a while; let the PM focus on the economy and help those affected by the floods," said Bersatu deputy president Datuk Seri Ahmad Faizal Azumu.

Public trust in the government has eroded, Ismail Sabri's image has dipped and his Cabinet has been bashed left, right and centre.

The floods have receded but his troubles are not over.

Political commentator Dr Azmi Omar said political careers are made or broken in a crisis.

"Had the PM been able to seize the moment and taken charge when the waters started rising, he would have been the undisputed leader in his party.

Ismail Sabri is struggling to repair his image after the flood crisis and to mend ties with his party.

"He would be the one to take over the party and take it further - but the floods changed all that. Ministers were recalled from their vacations only to treat the floods as a photo-shoot," said Azmi.

The Prime Minister's post has come to resemble some kind of poisoned chalice, laced with endless problems and controversies.

For instance, Ismail Sabri is under tremendous pressure to act on the scandals involving the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), a graft-busting body that now needs to be busted for graft.

Ismail Sabri is also grappling with issues connected to his party. He is the first prime minister from Umno who is not the party president.

It has been problematic being the big boss in the government but not the boss in his party. Moreover, he is not aided by a strong team.

As an Umno vice-president, he has no control over the party and he had complained to his inner circle that he is left out of important party decisions.

He was apparently not consulted on key decisions on the Melaka election but his detractors claimed that was because party leaders were upset that he had tried to push

Umno to collaborate with Bersatu in the polls.

He is also not on the best of terms with his party president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and the perception that he listens to Muhyiddin more than his own president is damaging him.

The anti-Bersatu sentiment among the Umno rank and file has worsened after the Melaka election where battle lines were clearly drawn.

For instance, a popular division warlord in Perak was heckled when he tried to defend his ties with Bersatu during the Umno division meetings last month.

The rift between Ismail Sabri and the Umno leadership has become serious enough for people in the party to ask him to "come back to the fold".

They want him to address the friction points and engage the party.

"No prime minister can survive without his party standing by him. We want him to succeed because if he fails as the PM, the party will suffer in the general election," said a supreme council member.

That is unlikely to happen with the ongoing tug-of-war over whether to hold the party election before or after the 15th general election (GE15).

Ismail Sabri wants to go for a full term, which means he is pushing for the party polls to run first.

But the majority of the Umno divisions are not with him on that.

It is learnt that during the divisions' annual general assemblies (AGMs) last month, 80 divisions passed resolutions calling for GE15 to be held this year, by which they mean that it should take place soon after July.

Another 81 divisions wanted to leave it to the party leadership to decide.

Six divisions wanted the Umno election to be held first while another 21 divisions called for GE15 to be held in 2023.

The writing is on the wall and it will be perilous if the Prime Minister chooses to ignore it.

Sungai Buloh division deputy chief Datuk Harrison Hassan, who is for a later GE15, said postponing the party polls has become an unhealthy tradition that breeds the warlord culture.

"The first thing I do every morning is to check my Twitter. The opinion there is not good, they are bashing everybody - politicians, government bodies and even royalty.

"The Opposition is weak but is our party strong? We don't want to miss the boat but we have to make sure

our party is ready," said Harrison.

Datuk Affendi Zahari, the Titiwangsa deputy chief who moved a resolution in his division for GE15 to be held soon, said the Prime Minister managed to regain some lost ground with the post-flood assistance and aid.

"But there are many things he wants to do but cannot for fear of parties pulling out. That was why our division called for an early GE15," he said.

The ding-dong over the party polls and GE15 will reach its climax at the Umno general assembly, which is likely to take place in March.

Will Ismail Sabri stand his ground and continue to push for the party elections to take place before GE15?

He is eyeing the Umno presidency and the post did have his name on it until the floods swept in.

So much has changed and he cannot assume that it will be a walk in the park in the event of a party election.

The new reality is that the Umno presidency is no longer synonymous with the premiership. Neither is being a prime minister any guarantee to winning the Umno presidency.

The views expressed here are the writer's own.