

Is the PM ready to take the plunge?

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Almost every Umno meeting in the past few weeks has discussed preparations for the general election, a sign that the big day is near.

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Analysis

THE pressure is mounting on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob and it is coming from all directions.

His administration is struggling to manage inflation which has hit the ordinary folk where it hurts most – their stomachs and pockets.

His party, especially the state Umno chiefs, have urged him to dissolve Parliament before the economy worsens and voters get angrier.

His predecessor Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin is demanding that Ismail Sabri holds to their agreement to appoint a deputy prime minister from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia.

An agreement document signed by the two men was leaked in connection to this.

Then there is the grand stand-off with the Registrar of Societies (ROS) over Umno's bid to amend its constitution to allow the party the

option of holding its election six months after the general election.

Lady Luck is no longer smiling so sweetly on Ismail Sabri.

State party chiefs who met with Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi on Tuesday were told to ramp up their preparations for a general election.

A state chief said he expected Parliament to be dissolved in early October after the tabling of the Budget.

"All the talk that Mail (Ismail Sabri) wants to go full term is nonsense. The PM is as anxious as us to have an election," said the above state chief.

While Umno leaders remain hopeful of a positive answer from the ROS, the top brass is not taking chances.

The so-called "Plan B" is in the process of being put into effect.

"We risk being deregistered if we wait for an answer from the ROS. We need to work from a worst case scenario and prepare to hold our party election before the deadline," said Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan.

Mohamad, who is also chairman of the Umno management committee, said notices for the branch meetings would be sent out soon.

The delayed response from the ROS is clearly political rather than technical.

Party secretary-general Datuk Seri Ahmad Maslan had submitted the application two days after the amendments were passed at an EGM in May.

Two weeks later, the ROS asked for more documents which Ahmad personally handed over.

"As far as we are concerned, we have complied with our documentation," said Mohamad.

It is learnt that Umno also engaged the services of a top legal eagle for his expert opinion on the matter.

The opinion among the Umno rank-and-file is that Home Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainudin is playing politics.

Not a single soul in Umno believed it when Hamzah claimed to have no control over the ROS and some are asking why the Home Minister has become so powerful.

"Who is in control here? Is Hamzah that invincible and untouchable? You mean no one, not even the PM, can push him?"

"If Umno is forced to hold its party election because of this, the Putrajaya cluster will have problems," said political analyst Dr Azmi Omar.

What is happening is actually

political gamesmanship at the highest level.

Bersatu leaders are basically telling the Prime Minister to keep his promise on the deputy prime minister post if he wants the green light from the ROS.

Moreover, only two pages of the three-page agreement signed by Muhyiddin and Ismail Sabri, back in August, were leaked.

The missing page is believed to be the part on the appointment of the No. 2 post.

The Bersatu side is very likely waiting for Ismail Sabri to respond. If he denies it, the missing page will suddenly be leaked too.

It is possible that Ismail Sabri signed the document with good intentions before realising he would face a revolt in Umno.

Giving the No. 2 slot to Bersatu would be empowering the enemy, giving it additional clout going into the general election.

Muhyiddin had wanted Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali for the deputy prime minister's job, but Ismail Sabri knew that appointing Azmin would be problematic for various reasons.

Hamzah was also a potential candidate, but Ismail Sabri told a top-notch source that "Umno will kill

me" if he appoints Hamzah as deputy prime minister.

The same source said that if Ismail Sabri had a choice, he would have picked Bersatu deputy president Datuk Seri Ahmad Faizal Azumu who, by the way, was the only one among the leading Bersatu leaders who did not lobby for the job.

Ismail Sabri had attempted to take the middle path in the ongoing conflict between Umno and Bersatu but the rivalry was too great to be negotiated.

"I want to quote (former British prime minister) Margaret Thatcher on this – you cannot stand in the middle of the road, you will get run over," said a political contemporary of Ismail Sabri.

Umno's trouble with the ROS is among a string of reasons why Ismail Sabri is struggling to lead the country on a borrowed mandate.

It is tough being the Prime Minister in a government of "frenemies" because the knives are flying from outside as well as inside.

He needs to seek his own mandate and the signs are that Ismail Sabri is quite ready to take the big plunge.

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