

# PM-Zahid rift may be a red herring

Ismail Sabri and the Umno president treat rumours of a split between them as a way to keep the enemy confused.

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Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

WHAT a confusing way to end the week. One of Umno's fiercest warlords was sacked from the party's supreme council on Friday evening.

The supreme council meeting was also noted for the absence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob and, within hours, rumours were flying of a fallout between the Umno president and the Prime Minister.

From outside looking in, it seemed like cracks were forming in Umno as it moved towards the general election.

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi's stinging comments about the sacking of Pasir Salak chief Datuk Seri Tajuddin Abdul Rahman also fuelled speculation of a rift in the top decision-making body.

Tajuddin has been a vocal opponent of the push for an early election and his sacking was perceived as a clash between the two Perakian warlords.

But Ahmad Zahid had been wait-

ing for an opportunity to strike at those standing in the way of early polls.

He had stripped Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim and Tan Sri Annuar Musa from key decision-making positions in Umno earlier on and it was now Tajuddin's turn.

The Umno president is known for his "jantan" or macho political style. But did he have to suggest that Tajuddin was removed because he had acted out of turn as a supreme council member?

Tajuddin is about to take off as the next ambassador to Indonesia. Why couldn't Ahmad Zahid have let bygones be bygones?

"Why should Zahid be apologetic? It's his style, he is an Alpha male. You go against him and this is what happens," said a Selangor Umno personality.

Ahmad Zahid is also a typical Javanese and when he brings out his *keris* (dagger), you are finished.

Tajuddin naturally felt hurt by what Ahmad Zahid said.

He had been there for Ahmad Zahid when Umno was at its lowest.

He had organised the first Melayu Bangkit gathering in Pasir Salak between Umno and PAS, which eventually led to the formation of Muafakat Nasional.

"He gave back the sense of confidence and direction to Umno. But now that the party has recovered, he feels they are throwing him out like an used tissue," said his eldest son Dr Faizal Tajuddin who is Pasir Salak vice-chief.

Tajuddin explained this at a special meeting in his division on Saturday night, reading out the letter officially thanking him for his services to the supreme council.

He admitted that he was outspoken at supreme council meetings but denied betraying Umno.

What about rumours of cracks between Ahmad Zahid and Ismail Sabri?

Ismail Sabri could not attend the Umno supreme council meeting that evening because he had an online meeting with international leaders.

But the two men apparently call and talk to each other seven-

ral times a week.

Ahmad Zahid informs Ismail Sabri, who is an Umno vice-president, before he pursues major party decisions.

Ismail Sabri also keeps his president updated on decisions that affect the party.

"Not many people know that Zahid and Ismail's elder brother Kamarulzaman were roommates in Universiti Malaya in 1975. Their families knew each other.

"Don't underestimate the relationship between them," said Temerloh Umno chief Datuk Seri Sharkar Shamsudin.

The two were not always this close but their joint interests are now in sync.

Highly placed sources told *The Star* that the Umno president and the Prime Minister have reached a crucial understanding that has been inked and witnessed by someone they both trust.

It is a super-secretive deal that not many in the party are aware of.

They have agreed in principle that 60%-70% of the Umno parlia-

mentary candidates will be decided by Ismail Sabri.

This means that he will be able to pick those who support him as candidates and, more important, these people will ensure that he continues as prime minister if Barisan Nasional wins the general election.

It will put to rest suspicions that the poster boy may not return as prime minister.

Ahmad Zahid, on the other hand, will have absolute say over the choice and selection of candidates for all the state seats contested by Umno.

The two top guns have carved out a division of power that places both of them on equal footing.

The arrangement will enable both men to keep a check on each other. But ultimately, they will need one another to move forward.

Meanwhile, they do not mind the swirling rumours of a split because they see it as way to keep the enemy confused.

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