



It's just politics

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DURING the Chinese New Year lunch and dinner meet-ups I've been attending, the FAQ is who could make a political comeback.

I am not sure why this is a hot topic.

Perhaps because I meet up mostly with people - businessmen, politicians, and academicians - who are political junkies. Or maybe because they know I write about politics.

"Ismail Sabri could be the next PM," has been my regular reply of late, referring to Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the former Umno vice president who was prime minister from August 2021 to November 2022. The Bera MP no longer holds a top position in Umno, as he did not defend his VP post in the last party elections, in March 2023.

Most laughed at my suggestion.

"How can he be PM again?" many said. "He is not politically savvy."

"Don't laugh," I've been replying. "Ismail Sabri has been making moves the last few months. And not being politically savvy might be a plus for him as many politicians don't want to support someone who is too smart."

Usually someone in the group would support me; one person recently said, "Ismail Sabri is acceptable to most politicians who want to be in power. He

The art of the impossible

Comebacks out of left field, historic reversals, global surprises - who knows what could happen in Malaysian politics (even before the next general elections).



Impossible comebacks? Najib (left) and Ismail Sabri have both had stints as prime minister - could either one occupy that post again? - Filepics/The Star

was amiable when he was PM."

"More laughable would be Najib back as PM," a businessman said, referring to jailed former prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

"The world will be laughing at us," he said, laughing.

"Don't laugh. There is a possibility that Najib could become PM again," I said.

That stopped his laughter.

"Dr Mahathir made a comeback. Anwar made a comeback. Most had said these comebacks were impossible, but they happened," I reminded him.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed did the impossible and returned in 2018 as PM at the age of 92. Who would have dared bet on that after he retired as prime minister in October 2003?

After being sacked as deputy prime minister and Umno deputy president in September 1999,

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim also did what most Malaysians believed was impossible. Anwar was appointed Prime Minister after the 15th General Election (GE15) in November 2022.

"With these comebacks, I dare not say that Najib can't also make a comeback," I said.

"Even with Ismail Sabri, before he became PM, almost nobody would have believed he would get the post," I reminded everyone.

It was easier to predict politics in Malaysia before 2018.

The prime minister was always the Umno president. The only thing unpredictable when I began covering the field in 1994 was who would become deputy Umno president and how long that politician would last under Dr Mahathir.

The longest-serving prime minister, Dr Mahathir had four suc-

cessive deputies: Tun Musa Hitam, Tun Ghafar Baba, Anwar, and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. When Dr M retired in 2003, Abdullah Ahmad replaced him.

The game to watch back then was who could be one of the three elected Umno vice-presidents. It was always an intense fight as one of the three could then become deputy prime minister - a heartbeat away from becoming PM.

Before GE14 in 2018, the talk was whether then Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Hussein would challenge Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, then Umno deputy president. The talk was about Najib's preference for his first cousin, Hishamuddin, to be his deputy in Umno and the Federal Government.

The seismic shift of GE14 of

course ended Umno's dominance of Malaysian politics with Pakatan Harapan winning a simple majority. Politics irrevocably changed from being predictably dependent on the grand old political party to the musical chairs game of coalition politics.

In GE14, there were three political comebacks: Dr Mahathir (who was out of Umno at this point), Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin (sacked by Najib as deputy prime minister and Umno deputy president in 2015), and Anwar.

After the GE15 results were announced in November 2022, Muhyiddin could have joined Dr Mahathir to become a politician who became PM twice. The Pagoh MP thought he had enough MPs supporting him to create history. However, it was Anwar who became PM.

So could Najib become PM for a second time?

Those who oppose him say it is impossible. But for his adoring fans, it is possible.

At one of the CNY events, I asked a Najib insider what the chances were of seeing the former PM back in power.

"He will get a royal pardon before GE16. And he will lead a coalition of MPs from various parties to win the election," said the insider, who is known to be ... brash, shall we say.

If I had heard this before the fall of Umno - which hardly anyone saw coming - in GE14, I might even have joined in the talk about this particular comeback. Back then, the powers that be in Umno determined who would be prime minister.

Now, though, Malaysian politics is, as they say, the art of the impossible.

And don't be surprised if Ismail Sabri becomes PM before GE16. I can hear the laughter at this speculation - but anything can happen.