

# Najib's house arrest stirs drama

Enabling Najib to serve his sentence under house arrest will appease Umno members but further damage the credibility of Pakatan Harapan leaders.

SOME said it would be a secret meeting, but how can it be a secret when the attendance list comprised so many division leaders of Umno?

As things turned out, a total of 160 Umno division chiefs gathered at the Royale Chulan Hotel Kuala Lumpur in a show of support for Datuk Seri Najib Razak's bid to be allowed to serve the rest of his corruption conviction under house arrest. It was less a secret meeting than a meeting about a sensitive issue.

It seems like Umno is done with tip-toeing around the addendum issue and there was a no-holds-barred air to the evening, with the key speaker, Wangsa Maju chief Datuk Seri Shafei Abdullah, lashing out at Tan Sri Ahmad Terrirudin Mohd Salleh, who was the attorney general at the time the addendum was drawn up.

The addendum issue has hovered over Umno like a dark cloud.

Umno is a royalist party and its members do not understand why the government has not adhered to the addendum, which it considers to be a "titah Tuanku", or royal decree by the former Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

This has been a rather unfortunate year for Terrirudin, who has been making news for all the wrong reasons.

He is the target of commentary among the Umno crowd and was the subject of some rather nasty speculation in connection to the judicial appointments.

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## Analysis

In Chinese feng shui, it would be deemed one of those years when one is "sitting atop the head of the Grand Duke", which translates to an unlucky year.

The Umno crowd that evening claimed the addendum was concealed for more than a year.

"First, they denied its existence; we were told it was hearsay. Now they say there is an addendum, but it did not observe the proper process. Of course, we are frustrated. Our members are asking why we cannot do anything, although we are in the government," said Ketereh division chief Datuk Seri Alwi Che Ahmad.

Some of those at the gathering even want Najib to be allowed house arrest before the Sabah election so that he can help "campaign" for the party from home.

Shafei, who was Najib's former political secretary, concluded by urging Umno divisions, which are currently having their annual general meetings, to pass resolutions to defend the Malay Rulers and urge the government to

implement the addendum.

Pakatan Harapan leaders have gone back on many of the promises they made before coming to power, but backtracking on Najib's conviction could be the proverbial nail in the coffin.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is struggling against public opinion over many of his policies and he cannot afford to cave in over Najib and the 1MDB scandal. Whatever support that Pakatan has will wither away the day Najib returns home on house arrest.

Despite the aggressive tone of the Umno gathering, many of them are doubtful that Najib's bid for house arrest will ever see the light of day.

So why are they making such a song and dance about it?

Najib, according to an aide to a Johor leader, has become some sort of an Achilles heel to Umno.

"The Umno general assembly will take place in a few months time and the leadership cannot be seen to be sitting on their hands," said the aide.

Umno deputy president and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan, who has been swamped by invitations to officiate at Umno division meetings, admits that queries about Najib's fate and the party's cooperation with DAP are among the concerns.

"These are concerns that have not subsided after more than two years in the unity government. But my key message is that we

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needed to be united as a party because people out there will not support a party that is divided," said Mohamad.

The Prime Minister has been strategic in responding to Umno's demands on the royal addendum. He said he is ready to meet with Umno, to talk and clarify.

"He is a seasoned politician; he can sense the veiled threats behind their demands. What was said at the hotel gathering has been as fierce as some of the speeches we get at Umno general assemblies," said the above aide to a Johor leader.

Can Anwar also sense Umno's ambitions for the premiership in time to come? It is no secret that the inner circle of Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi thinks he should get a shot at it.

Ahmad Zahid is very strong in Umno. Few dare to criticise him and an outspoken party official from Johor had a taste of his president's wrath when Ahmad Zahid openly blasted him during a division AGM.

It has been suggested that all those division chiefs would not have gathered at Royale Chulan without their president's blessing.

Ahmad Zahid was in New Zealand and the insider joke is that he brought along his "loudspeaker", Umno Youth chief Datuk Dr Muhamad Akmal Saleh, so that the hotel gathering would not get too heated up given Akmal's talent for controversy.

Only division chiefs without

government posts attended.

Ministers and deputy ministers, as well as those with positions at the state level, were visibly absent. The intent was to avoid a situation of government leaders railing against the government.

In that sense, the Royale Chulan affair was like one of those Malay silat moves, where you cannot see where the real blow is coming from.

How sincere are Umno leaders about the addendum issue?

Are they merely going through the motions to appease their grassroots and assuage the Najib family?

Is Umno riding on Najib the way DAP exploited Teoh Beng Hock's death for political capital?

Do Umno leaders, especially Ahmad Zahid, really want Najib back home, where he could be an alternative centre of gravity in the party?

"Umno members are realistic. They do not want Najib back as their leader. They see him as someone who can play a balancing role and say things their leaders cannot," said the above Johor aide.

The Prime Minister needs Umno on his side, but he does not need Najib.

The addendum issue resembles a political tug-of-war between two partners within the same government. There is no winner in this sort of situation.

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