

Daggers, smiles in Bersatu's politics

THE chants of "hidup Tan Sri!" must have struck a sweet chord in Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin when he arrived for the Bersatu supreme council meeting on Tuesday night.

He smiled, shook hands with almost everyone and even allowed a few to kiss his hand, which he usually does not encourage.

The Bersatu president has been under siege for weeks, subjected to attacks by enemies from within, which have been played up to the hilt by a hungry media.

The warm reception was engineered by Youth chief Muhammad Hilman Idham, an acolyte of secretary-general Datuk Seri Azmin Ali.

The pro-Muhyiddin faction is doing what it takes to show support, and vice-president Datuk Seri Ahmad Faizal Azumu was said to have spent hours calling up supreme council members to brief them on the situation.

Muhyiddin had a few pre-emptive moves of his own. He sensed the tension as his deputy Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin and vice-president Datuk Dr Ronald Kiandee did not attend the political bureau meeting a night earlier.

A source said the pair had indicated that they did not wish to cause trouble, but would react to any hostility at the supreme council meetings.

As the supreme council members helped themselves to some kampung-style food, Muhyiddin had a private chat with Hamzah

While president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin tries to maintain peace in his party, the mood at the supreme council meeting shows that internally, it is far from calm.



Analysis

and Azmin to hammer out a "gentleman's agreement".

He started the meeting by saying that he wanted to address the elephant in the room, namely the unrest in the party, and said the three of them had agreed to set aside their differences for now.

He said no one wins if they continue to fight, and he wanted the meeting to be smooth and productive, focusing on the Sabah polls.

There were claps of approval as he had set the tone for the night.

"The party interest is central to the president. He intends to manage the crisis," said Azmin.

Hamzah and Azmin were also seen chatting at the meeting, reportedly discussing candidates and seats for the Sabah election.

"It's terrible to see our members washing dirty laundry in public," said a supreme council member.

Muhyiddin was in an ebullient mood over what he called a

"peaceful meeting", and a group of his supporters adjourned to a nasi kandar outlet in Bangsar, where they stayed until lam.

Hamzah did not join the supper session. He had a less-than-warm reception when he arrived for the meeting, and a lady in the crowd had called out "jangan salam", asking people not to greet him.

Indera Mahkota MP Datuk Seri Saifuddin Abdullah, who has also criticised Muhyiddin, was booed.

It was a night where everyone was reminded of the power of incumbency of a sitting president, especially one who enjoys the loyalty of his secretary-general.

However, as the supreme council was going on, Machang MP Wan Ahmad Fayhsal Wan Ahmad was blasting away at Muhyiddin in the *Keluar Sekejap* podcast.

Hamzah has repeatedly said he is the "number one supporter" of his president and had told the BFM radio station that Muhyiddin intends to hand over the presidency to him.

The impression is that Hamzah has thrown his allies, such as Wan Ahmad Fayhsal and Saifuddin, under the bus.

Actually, Hamzah is still watching out for his loyalists, especially Wan Ahmad Fayhsal, and the internal warfare is far from over.

Hamzah is an enigmatic per-

sonality beneath that personal charm, polish and patrician good looks. It is hard to tell what is in his mind behind that easy smile.

He can be quite secretive, and there are many layers to his personality.

There seems to be a rather sophisticated kind of Malay politics going on, where daggers are accompanied by smiles.

The key man appears to be going with the flow while his henchmen hammer away.

The attacks on Muhyiddin are to signal that his time at the top is limited. Some think it is also to warn against any attempts to remove or sack Hamzah.

Muhyiddin, said a trusted aide, is a fighter who has taken on bigger personalities than the young Turks in the party.

He had told the aide that if they want him to go, do it properly and go by the party constitution.

"I don't understand why they are doing this. To be the next president, you need to be the deputy president. The fact that Muhyiddin picked Hamzah shows that he sees him as his successor.

"I have appealed to Hamzah many times to speak to his boys. He says, 'ya, ya, okay', but they don't stop," said the aide.

Azmin, on his part, said he has no issues working with Hamzah.

He said they worked closely when they were in the government and that he accepts Hamzah as his deputy president.

But can Azmin accept Hamzah as the next Bersatu president?

"If that's the decision of the delegates, I have to accept their decision. My trademark is loyalty - I was loyal to (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) and his family for 40 years. I am still loyal to (Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) and I will stay loyal to Muhyiddin," he said.

PAS leaders have steered clear of Bersatu's infighting, but it is no longer a secret that they are partial to Hamzah.

Hamzah and Ronald are joint election directors in the Sabah polls.

It is unclear whether Perikatan Nasional can make any impact in Sabah, given the anti-peninsula mood, but the campaign launched on Friday night seemed like a show of force for their group.

Some suggest the peace which Muhyiddin referred to will not be permanent, and the civil war will resume after the Sabah polls.

Muhyiddin intends to stay on as the number one, but his "number one supporter" is unlikely to make it easy for him.

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