

Quietly, Najib works to keep Umno critics, warlords happy

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BY THE MALAYSIAN INSIDER

More important for Datuk Seri Najib Razak's longevity as president of Umno than last night's Kuala Besut by-election victory has been his behind-the-scenes moves to hush the "fighters" in the party with plum positions and reach out to influential critics such as former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin.

Daim has been a persistent critic since the May 5 general elections returned Barisan Nasional (BN) to power but with fewer seats at parliament and state level than five years ago.

Chief among his complaints has been indecisive leadership of Najib (pic), wrong election strategy and penchant for listening to a collection of ineffective strategists.

And while Daim has spoken sparingly in public about his views on the PM and his deep concerns over the fate of the coalition in the next general election, individuals close to the former Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad strongman have been less reticent, keen to point out that Tun Abdullah Badawi was forced to make way after the BN coalition he led in 2008, won 140 parliamentary seats. In turn, Najib's BN won seven fewer seats than Abdullah at parliamentary level.

On Monday, Najib and his wife reached out to Daim, attending a buka puasa function at the latter's home in Taman Melawati, near Kuala Lumpur. While it remains to be seen if this approach by the PM will be sufficient to shut off the flow of criticisms against his style and substance of his leadership, it shows his willingness to put aside his pride and attempt to assuage even trenchant critics.

In recent weeks, Najib has also tried to appease Umno warlords known for their organisational skills on the ground and their caustic tongues, both important skills in the run-up to party elections in October.

Datuk Abdul Azeez Rahim, head of the Putera Umno wing, was appointed chairman of Tabung Haji, and former minister Datuk Seri Annuar Musa was made chairman of Mara.

Both these appointments did not go down well in corporate circles with questions being asked about the calibre and the standing of the two politicians to head these cash-rich organisations.

But Najib has ignored the gush of criticisms, preferring instead to focus on his strategic needs in an election year rather than the absence of gravitas of his appointments to top positions in government-linked companies.

The Business Times has also reported that Umno strongman Datuk Seri Ali Rustam is likely to be tapped as the head of Perbadanan Nasional Berhad (PNB) to replace former Chief Secretary to the Government Tun Ahmad Sarji.

Ali could be appointment as the Umno secretary-general but there are indications that he would prefer to contest for one of the three vice-president positions.

Other Umno politicians who have been rewarded or who are likely to be given positions in government agencies or GLCs are former Johor menteri besar Tan Sri Abdul Ghani Othman, former deputy minister Datuk Othman Abdul and vociferous backbencher Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin.

Still even with his backroom moves in full flow, Najib was keen to capitalise on Umno's victory in the Kuala Besut by-election. He told Bernama last night that the victory was a signal of Umno's continued strength.

Umno Youth's Khairy Jamaluddin said during the campaign period that the result in the by-election would have some bearing on Najib's political fortunes.

But in reality, the campaign was run by deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin and Umno was expected to regain the seat easily. Its 2,592-vote majority was a slight increase over what the party achieved on May 5 and the opposition were quick to point out that the winning margin was some way off the 4,000 majority predicted by Umno's Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh at the onset of the contest.

Critics also said that the BN government spent more than RM300 million and this unprecedented amount of funds for a small state constituency only translated to a slight increase in votes.

But a victory is a victory and what the win in Kuala Besut does is that it gives Najib some breathing space to reach out to the likes of Daim and other critics in the party and persuade them that he has what it takes to prevent Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Pakatan Rakyat from making further gains in five years. - July 25, 2013.

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