

Quashing a whisper before it gathers voice in Umno polls
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He has been in the toxic world of politics from the age of 23; seen three deputy prime ministers being hounded out of office and watched from the sidelines as one prime minister was harassed and harried and forced to step down in 2009.

He has had a front-row seat as a serial offender schemed and plotted the end of Tun Musa Hitam, Tun Ghafar Baba, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his biggest scalp, Tun Abdullah Badawi.

So, it is understandable for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak to be nervous about the looming presence of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (pic), to be uncomfortable about the former PM's caustic comments about him being indecisive, too accommodating to non-Malays and too weak to lead Umno and Barisan Nasional back to redemption five years down the road.

At a recent gathering before Dr Mahathir's fan club, the Kelab Chedet, the former prime minister was not quite charitable in his assessment of Najib. Also, during an overseas holiday with a prominent businessman, he noted that Najib had practically thrown everything at the voters but still could not deliver the BN gold standard of a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

It is not that Najib has not heard the whispers. In fact, in the past few days, he has been meeting Umno division chiefs and MPs, asking for their support for him to remain as president.

He has talked to them about needing support to bash through internal party resistance against bringing in young Malay talent. In short, he has been taking part in a one-man audition for the top job in Umno, knowing that Dr Mahathir and his ilk are chipping away at his credentials to lead.

A member of parliament and Umno division chief told The Malaysian Insider: "The PM knows that he needs our support if there is a public campaign against him by Mahathir. He will fight to stay on and the view among some of us is that even though Najib did not deliver the two-thirds majority, he is still the best to lead Umno."

There is no rest for the harassed, so Najib met several veteran Umno MPs on the eve of Hari Raya to shore up his support.

What is quite clear is that some Umno insiders believe Najib faces a Ghafar Baba-type situation, where an insidious whispering campaign finally reaches a crescendo just before the party polls in October, forcing Najib to either step down or to set out a timetable for his withdrawal from the political scene.

Ghafar Baba was Dr Mahathir's deputy prime minister during the difficult days after Musa Hitam resigned in 1986. He believed he had the support of Dr Mahathir and contested the deputy president's post in 1993, without realising that moves sanctioned by the top were already underway to replace him with Anwar Ibrahim. Ghafar was forced to withdraw in the face of a wipeout.

In Najib's favour at this time is the fact that his deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin is reluctant to make a run for the top job. Najib's boys believe that Muhyiddin will prefer to enjoy his retirement rather than subject his family's involvement in business and government contracts to scrutiny.

Another potential challenger, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, is occupying another time zone altogether, Umno officials said. They pointed out that at present he has a clutch of Sabah Umno MPs in his corner and possibly a few from Sarawak, but precious few from West Malaysia. In short, he is likely to once again miss his chance to lead Umno.

So on paper it looks like Najib does not have to worry about any challengers for the top position in Umno.

But the man who had his first taste of politics in 1976 after his father's death, knows that there is a restlessness in Umno today – a restlessness that can be tapped by Dr Mahathir and his supporters.

He saw this happen to Abdullah in 2008 when wave after wave of criticism was launched by Dr Mahathir following BN's poor performance in GE12. That wave of attacks emboldened Umno politicians to call for Abdullah's resignation. Mahathir's executor-in-chief in that campaign was Muhyiddin. Najib was pretty much on the sidelines.

Now he has to wait and see.

The main difference between Najib and Abdullah: Abdullah did not have the stomach for a battle to remain as Umno president while Najib seems ready to dig in, given his dragnet approach to win support of Umno MPs and division chiefs. – August 9, 2013.

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