

## **Comeuppance or deja vu, Najib feels the heat from old Umno hands**

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What goes around comes around.

Just after the 2008 elections, Datuk Seri Najib Razak watched as the then prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi got skewered for Barisan Nasional's (BN) abysmal showing at the polls, with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad leading the campaign to oust Pak Lah from office.

The constant hammering took its toll and in March 2009, Abdullah made way for Najib. Until today, Abdullah's supporters believe that the so-called groundswell against the PM was not as widespread as painted by Dr Mahathir and his instigator-in-chief, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

But Abdullah had little drive to stay and fight, concerned that a war with his nemesis would mortally wound Umno.

Truth be told, he also never recovered from that day in March when BN lost five states and the two-thirds control of Parliament.

So he handed power over to Najib, though his men on the ground told him that Najib was part of the campaign to unseat him.

By then, he either chose not to believe that his deputy was plotting against him or was indifferent.

Wounded and upset, some of Abdullah's supporters consoled themselves with the belief that Najib would receive his comeuppance one day.

It seems that day has come.

What goes around comes around.

It has taken about five years but Najib now knows what it feels to be under siege by Dr Mahathir and his supporters.

He is concerned. He should be.

Because he has witnessed the tenacity and destructiveness of Dr Mahathir; the manner in which the former prime minister keeps chipping away at the perceived weaknesses of his enemy and the doctor's ability to paint a dire picture for party and country if his target remains at the helm.

The Mahathir machinery has started moving, with the former PM meeting small groups and repeating the mantra about Najib being a weak leader and the real possibility of BN losing power in the next polls if he is still at the controls.

For good measure, Dr Mahathir has also hammered Najib's reliance on advisers, consultants and Pemandu, the government efficiency unit led by former Malaysia Airlines managing director Datuk Seri Idris Jala.

Sound familiar? It should. In 2008, the attack was on Abdullah's reliance on the Fourth Floor, his group of youngish advisers.

Najib's circle knows the parallel between then and now.

They have no intention of waging open warfare against Dr Mahathir and other critics.

What the PM and his team intend to do is meet as many powerful individuals in Umno and influential Malay groups to explain his political and economic strategy as well as answer directly criticisms raised against him by Dr Mahathir, Tun Daim Zainuddin and others.

By doing so, the Najib camp hopes that the attempt to create a groundswell against him in Umno would be stillborn.

The PM and his team know that critics in Umno are predicting that there would be a change in leadership soon, as early as April.

But they scoff at this talk, pointing out that Najib has the powerful Umno Supreme Council in his corner and, unlike Abdullah, is prepared to use all the powers of incumbency to stay in office.

The only problem with relying on Umno bigwigs for support is that the support is never ironclad.

Often enough, the lure of lucre and power can tempt even the "staunchest" supporter.

At the height of the attacks against Abdullah, several powerful politicians swore to defend him.

But in closed-door sessions, they, too, attacked Abdullah.

Today, one of these individuals is holding a powerful position in Umno and has reportedly pledged his allegiance to Najib.

Najib's challenge is to persuade/convince/cajole the power brokers in Umno that he is going to end up winning any war of attrition being mounted against him by his critics.

But it will not be a walk in the park. Far from it.

There is anger over the rising cost of living; the seemingly endless missteps by government ministers and the sense of drift in Malaysia.

Given this uneasy equilibrium, Najib and his team cannot afford an all-out war against their critics, a situation that will roil the country further.

He has to show his party that he remains their best bet and that his critics are coming to the table with dirty hands, motivated by self-interest and family considerations.

Abdullah's supporters in Umno are watching this drama unfold with an equal measure of indifference and glee.

What goes around comes around. – February 4, 2014.

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