

The Mahathir-Muhyiddin dynamics.

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Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) will be celebrating their first anniversary on 9 September 2017. When their first leadership line up was announced, there were seven names. The top three are Tun Mahathir Mohamad as Chairman, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin as President, and Dato Seri Mukhriz Mahathir as Deputy President.

Almost immediately tongues started to wag about how the structure shows there is a tussle between “Mahathir’s men” and “Muhyiddin’s men”.

This is understandable. Both are towering figures in our politics and both have their own followers. Plus, the organisational structure chosen by PPBM is also rather different from other parties. The existence of a Chairman on top of a President is confusing to many. But the constitution of PPBM is clear about how the two roles are different.

The Chairman chairs the Supreme Leadership Council, which is the highest executive body of the party. It consists of officials elected by the party’s annual general assembly, plus others who are appointed by the President following consultation with the Chairman. This is the main policy-making body in the party after the general assembly.

The President chairs the Presidential Council, which is the next highest structure in the party. It consists of the President, Deputy President, the five Vice Presidents, the Secretary General, the Treasurer, the Information Chief, and other appointed officials. This is the main body tasked with the operations and administration of the party.

Looking at the constitutional arrangement, the structure is really quite straightforward. There shouldn’t be any confusion because it is similar to any well-governed organisation. The Chairman and the CEO are two different people. The Board and the Management are two different teams too.

But the criticisms go deeper than just the organisational structure. Many have said that the rivalry between the two figures have led to Muhyiddin being seen as having to stand behind Mahathir. In other words, the accusation is that Muhyiddin is not assertive enough compared to Mahathir.

This view keeps appearing in my conversations with politicians in various parts of the country, including in Muhyiddin’s home-state of Johor, as well as with observers from outside Malaysia.

This perception, too, is understandable. If we go by the events held by PPBM, on the whole Mahathir has been more visible than Muhyiddin. Even in Johor, up to now, Mahathir's events are more hyped up. And, whenever people talk about PPBM, most of them would say that it is Mahathir's party.

By nature Mahathir has always been the more aggressive one. This has been the case right from his first entry into politics. Even at a time when he did not hold high position in UMNO he did not hesitate to speak his mind.

Frankly, I find it illogical for anyone to compare Mahathir with any other politician. He is a dominant and domineering figure, wherever he is. Comparing Muhyiddin, or anybody else for that matter, to Mahathir will never work well for the other person.

And that is why it is wrong for anyone to judge Muhyiddin by using Mahathir as the benchmark. The correct benchmark, in the context of PPBM today, would be how well is he fulfilling the role of President of the party. And if examined from that lense, he is actually doing very well.

PPBM today has a fully-staffed and well-equipped national head office in Petaling Jaya. Committed individuals have been appointed to hold the main positions, and the problematic ones are being dealt with.

More importantly, for a party that is only just becoming one year old in three weeks, Muhyiddin has done very well to set up divisions in more than 145 parliamentary constituencies across the country. He has turned a skeletal party into a threat to the country's strongest party, UMNO.

By any count, that is a lot of achievements in a short time. And all that is absolutely imperative to build a working party. Mahathir's assault need to be supported by a strong and credible infrastructure. Muhyiddin knows it, and he has been diligently working to build exactly that.

If they both try to do the same thing, or if Muhyiddin focuses too much on becoming what the public demands of him, PPBM's machineries will never be built.

Last week I had my first one to one chat with Muhyiddin. I saw that he is a meticulous and methodical person, and very thoughtful when answering my questions.

I went into the room thinking I want to personally ask him why he is not as forceful as some people wanted him to be. But I came out from the room realising that I was using the wrong benchmark. I wanted him to compete with Mahathir for public attention, but he knows that rivalry between them is not what his party needs. He believes a complementary approach is much better in order to build a fledgling party into a credible challenger. So far, he has proven himself right.

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