

The Muhyiddin-Mahathir Saga: When The Student Outplayed The Master

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The trouble with us Bugis is we are very parochial and tribal, and we support our Bugis brothers and sisters to a fault. Bugis comes first, Islam second, Malay third, and Malaysian last. Yes, ummah Bugis above ummah Islam, ummah Melayu and rakyat Malaysia.

I suppose the Chinese and Indians are the same. Field a Hokkien in a Hakka constituency or a non-Tamil in a Tamil constituency and it would be a disaster. The Chinese and Indians are more parochial and tribal than the Malays. In fact, at one time, the Chinese regarded foreigners as barbarians.

Haji Muhammad Yassin bin Muhammad, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's father, is a Bugis Malay. I first met Muhyiddin's elder brother, Aziz Yassin, back in the late 1970s (Muhyiddin does not know this).

I met Muhyiddin later when he was the Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry, which was around 1986 or so. His boss, the Minister of Trade and Industry, was Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah a.k.a. Ku Li.

And this is where it gets interesting.

Muhyiddin's political boss in Umno Johor was Tun Musa Hitam, who had just declared war on the Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Muhyiddin's Ministry boss, Ku Li, had also declared war on Mahathir.

Hence Muhyiddin was in a very delicate situation. Two of his bosses, Ku Li (his Minister) and Musa (the warlord of Umno Johor), were now at war with Mahathir (the Prime Minister), who was also his boss.

So how was Muhyiddin going to walk on what could be considered very thin ice?

Muhyiddin did not take the safe route, though. He chose to align himself with Mahathir. But then that would place him at the mercy of his Minister, Ku Li, and his Umno Johor boss and warlord, Musa. Muhyiddin was at the risk of getting eliminated if Ku Li and Musa won the Umno party election the following year in 1987.

This was a high stakes game. Public perception was that Ku Li and Musa, what was called Team B, were going to win against Mahathir's Team A in 1987. If that happened, then Muhyiddin's political career might end within the next year.

Most of Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Johor were with Musa and Ku Li. Hence Muhyiddin was the 'rare bird', the odd man out. He was playing Russian Roulette. If he won, he would gain much but the chances of losing were higher.

In the 1986 general election, Muhyiddin switched from the Pagoh parliamentary seat to the state seat of Bukit Serampang, which he won. Mahathir then told Muhyiddin he was going to be sent back to Johor as the new Menteri Besar to neutralise Musa, who was the Johor warlord and practically controlled Johor.

In short, Mahathir was sending Muhyiddin into the lion's den to either tame the lion or get eaten by the lion.

Muhyiddin begged Mahathir to spare him the fate of getting killed in Johor. As the Johor Menteri Besar, Muhyiddin was going to be surrounded by Musa loyalists. Muhyiddin did not see how he was going to survive one year as the Johor MB. The Musa loyalist will finish him off in no time.

Mahathir then asked Muhyiddin to sit down and listen to his lecture. As the Johore MB, Muhyiddin will be taking over as the new warlord with immense power. This power and position will enable him to dish out political patronage and to walk over and squash those who obstruct him or stand in his way.

You will have power, a lot of power, said Mahathir, so use this power to take control and to finish off those who oppose you. After Mahathir's 'pep talk', Muhyiddin agreed to take over as the new Johor MB.

Muhyiddin then told his wife, Noorainee, to pack their bags. They were going back to Johor to tame the lion and become the new lion of the state facing the Lion City called Singapura. Noorainee was not too sure whether to celebrate or to mourn that news. This was either going to propel Muhyiddin to new heights or it was going to end his political career.

But Muhyiddin survived that baptism of fire and nine years later, in 1995, he returned to the federal government after winning the Pagoh parliament seat for the third time.

In 2015, Mahathir once again called upon Muhyiddin to walk into the lion's den (like he once did back in 1986 when he returned to Johor as MB to neutralise Musa Hitam).

Muhyiddin was then the Deputy Prime Minister to Najib Tun Razak and Mahathir wanted Muhyiddin to lead the charge to bring down Najib. And Mahathir wanted to use the 1MDB issue as the weapon to bring down Najib.

Again, 29 years later, Muhyiddin was asked to be the mouse that will bell the cat. Muhyiddin survived the 1980s Team A versus Team B war when he took Mahathir's side. But then, at that time, Mahathir was the Prime Minister — even though Ku Li-Musa's Team B was stronger. This time around, Mahathir was not as strong as in the 1980s. Will Muhyiddin survive this second war?

In July 2015, Muhyiddin declared war on Najib. But the coup failed. Muhyiddin was sacked as the Deputy Prime Minister and was replaced by Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. The coup had collapsed because one of the coup members, the IGP, betrayed them. The IGP sold out Muhyiddin, the MACC chief, the AG, the Bank Negara Governor, Ku Li (yes, he was also in the conspiracy), and so on.

Muhyiddin had to plan his comeback or turnaround. So he decided to launch a new party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu, the following year in September 2016.

It was a huge risk, just like the huge risk Muhyiddin took back in 1986 by going back to Johor to become the new MB. But what did Muhyiddin have to lose anyway? He had agreed in July 2015 to become the mouse that would bell the cat and the cat had whacked him. What more could they do to him?

As fate would have it, less than two years later, Pakatan Harapan won the May 2018 general election or GE14. It was now time for Muhyiddin to reverse his fortunes.

In February 2020, Anwar Ibrahim made his move against Mahathir. Mahathir retaliated by resigning as Prime Minister and that left a power vacuum. More than 42 years of political experience has taught Muhyiddin what needs to be done. Muhyiddin made his move and within a week he was appointed the eighth Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Mahathir was Muhyiddin's master, sifu or guru. But a good student must eventually makan his guru. If not, then you are not a good student. All good students eventually take over from their master. And that was what Muhyiddin did on 1st March 2020. He proved to Mahathir he was a good student. And Mahathir must be very proud of his star student.

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