

'Tun issue' goes up another level

The 'Tun issue' made the news in an unexpected manner during the Umno general assembly, writes JOCELINE TAN

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INSIDE the glittering Dewan Merdeka, the debates were fiery and the Malay discontent almost palpable as one delegate after another spoke on the Malay Agenda.

But a drama had unfolded outside around the rather unlikely figure of Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir.

The second son of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had caused a stir with his remarks on the party president's policy speech. While most Umno delegates had praised the speech, Mukhriz said he was disappointed that there were no new ideas in it.

He paid for it the next day when his boss Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein declared that Mukhriz's stand did not reflect that of the movement.

Mukhriz, who is a Youth exco member, had put Hishammuddin in a tight spot.

A day later, the state Youth heads ganged up at a press conference to slam him and to ask him to think through what he had done.

They asked Mukhriz to reconsider his position in the Youth exco, which he won with the highest number of votes.

The same morning, Hisham-

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muddin upped the ante and issued an ultimatum: explain or face action.

Thus, by the time Mukhriz returned to the assembly after Friday prayers, the media were hounding him.

As he stepped off the escalator on the top floor of the PWTC, reporters swamped him, pressing him for a response to the reprimand from his Youth colleagues. They almost pushed him backwards.

Despite repeated “no comment” remarks from Mukhriz, pressmen only backed off after the doors to the Dewan Merdeka closed behind him.

The “Tun issue” had been quite successfully managed throughout the three-day debate.

Delegates who made references to the discord had generally taken the stand of full support for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and respect for Dr Mahathir.

But Mukhriz, 40, seems to have taken the issue to another level.

Was he reacting against what he perceived as slights against his father or was he merely speaking his mind when asked about the presidential address?

“He threw caution to the wind when he opened his mouth like that,” said an aide to a minister.

There were probably delegates who agreed with Mukhriz's opinion but in a situation like this, it is no longer about what is said but who said it.

First, there is the fact that his father is not on good terms with the party president. Thus, everything said, no matter how mild or innocuous, becomes bigger and more sensitive than it actually is.

Second, rightly or wrongly,

Mukhriz was seen as the political representative of Dr Mahathir who is still recuperating from his heart attack.

Third, the Youth wing had been given the honour of seconding the motion of thanks on the president's

speech. Thus, his remarks were highly embarrassing for the wing's leadership.

Fourth, Mukhriz won the Youth exco post with the highest number of votes: as such, his words are bound to have an impact.

was seated on the front row during his father's presidential speech but the publicity-shy businessman stayed away after that.

But Abdullah does not need his family to come to his defence. He has the party behind him and no shortage of party leaders and members voicing their support for his leadership.

Abdullah has remained unperturbed throughout.

In fact, reporters noted that he has been in an unusually good mood, fielding most of their questions during encounters with the press.

He made a brief, albeit respectful, reference to Dr Mahathir in his opening speech.

During his winding-up speech, he said that he was open to criticism, that people were free to tell him what was wrong and he would not be upset. The audience applauded since many of them knew he was referring to the scathing attacks from his predecessor. And that was about it.

It was obvious that as far as he was concerned, the general assembly was not the venue to dwell on the “Tun issue.”

He may seem soft to people but it looks like when he makes up his mind on something, it is hard to shake him.

The delegates rightly read his stance on the feud and steered from any direct discussion on the issue.

But that does not mean they are happy with the stalemate between the two men.

On the sidelines of the assembly, delegates were clearly concerned and a number of them still expressed hope for a solution.

The more urban and informed delegates think the issue is damaging to the party.

The less informed are confused but also want it to end.

They are also concerned that the dispute has gone international, referring to recent coverage in *Time* magazine and the *International Herald Tribune*. The latter report was raised at the assembly.

Reconciliation seems to be out of the question by now because too many strong and bitter words have been exchanged.

But action against Mukhriz, particularly if it is seen as too harsh, may also backfire. As it is, people watching the Youth attack on him are already comparing it to using a sledgehammer on a fly.

One should never underestimate the “kesian factor” or sympathy syndrome among ordinary Umno members.

Nevertheless, Mukhriz's political future looks rather precarious now. In fact, he may have even been seriously damaged.

He had been eyeing the Umno Youth leadership. After all this, few see him as a likely candidate because the Youth chief cannot be at odds with the party president.

“If you look at the history of Umno, anyone who deviates from the leader of the party finds himself alone. I think you can guess the fate of Mukhriz,” said a senior minister from Umno.

It is possible that Mukhriz is quite resigned to his situation. His action during the general assembly suggests that he has crossed the Rubicon.

It is true that there are no permanent friends or foes in politics but, in this case, it is clear that blood is also thicker than water.

Whatever his intentions, there is no doubt that Mukhriz is in hot water.

The general assembly ended on a note of unequivocal support for Abdullah, but the feud between the Prime Minister and Dr Mahathir is still simmering away.

Dr Mahathir has been out of action following his heart attack but his children seem to have taken up the standard on his behalf.

It was in contrast to family members of Abdullah. His son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin has kept largely to the sidelines this year apart from his high-octane winding speech at the Youth assembly on Tuesday.

Besides being a target of Dr Mahathir's attacks, the Umno Youth No. 2 has been seared by media scrutiny over the last couple of months and it is possible that he is keeping out of the spotlight for the time being.

Abdullah's daughter Nori was present throughout the assembly, often with her mother-in-law Datuk Rahmah Abdul Hamid at her side. But she stayed out of the politics although, given her people skills, she is probably much more savvy at the game than her husband.

Nori's elder brother Kamaluddin