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NAJIB'S UMNO: ENTER A NEW ERA

Yang Razali Kassim

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A new leader, Najib Tun Razak, has emerged in Malaysia to take the country into the next phase of nation-building. He has spoken of reform and change within the dominant party UMNO to preserve power. What challenges await in the Najib era?

ON 22 MARCH, just before taking over as UMNO president, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak spoke to the Malaysian media. With tongue half in cheek, he said he had noticed a new fad within the party in anticipation of his rise to power: "I hear that some of them opened their speeches with my father's name or even mine. I hear that 'Tun Razak' is back in fashion and that his time has become fashionable."

Enter the Najib Era

Indeed, the Najib flavour has even gone into space. The science and technology ministry named its latest satellite after his father 'RazakSAT'. A week later on 26 March, the UMNO party elections ushered in a transfer of power from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Najib, who had won uncontested, was pronounced the party's new president and successor, bringing in with him a fresh team of elected leaders. The power transition was formalised today (3 April) with a swearing ceremony, making him the sixth prime minister since 1957,

Najib's rise has not been without controversy, contributing to earlier speculation that his appointment would not be assented by the monarch. The new premier has however asked not to be prejudged. There are high expectations that he should pack his cabinet with leaders seen as clean and capable to further buttress his popular drive for reform and change initiated when he took over the UMNO presidency. Najib's "reform and transform" mantra is timely for UMNO, seen by many within and without as a party under threat of decay. Reversing the slide will however not be enough for him. The push for renewal and change has to extended to the ruling UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* coalition if the new fervour of self-correction is to have a wider impact.

UMNO in reform mode

Najib ushered in his leadership in aggressive style. Wasting no time, he stamped his mark with a reformist overdrive, virtually hijacking this theme from his nemesis, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim whose similar anti-corruption campaign partly contributed to his sacking from UMNO in 1998. Najib has to rally the troops and consolidate the party to regain much lost ground. His leadership was immediately demonstrated by the successful wooing back into the fold of Mahathir. The former premier quit the party last year in protest against some of the policies of Abdullah. The closing of ranks was crucial. For the first time, the public heard UMNO conceding that it could lose power completely if it failed to change its ways and uproot two ogres bedevilling the party -- money politics and power struggles. Leadership elections will now be opened up to the party grassroots to bypass centres of money politics higher up. Term limits to office may be introduced. Can Najib pull it off?

Money politics is deeply entrenched. As vested interests get uprooted, the clean-up could provoke a backlash on the new UMNO leader. Yet, Najib has little choice. In three years' time, another general election has to be called with the opposition expected to make further inroads. UMNO and its BN allies are not really ready for such a contest, not without turning around the waning public confidence in the ruling coalition. Will Najib dare to call a snap general election to secure the public mandate that every new prime minister needs? It will be a big gamble unless his reform of UMNO succeeds, and fast.

UMNO's new leadership is being immediately tested in the three by-elections on 7 April, one each in Perak, Kedah and Sarawak. Like it or not, these by-elections will be seen as a referendum of sorts on his leadership, although Najib has dismissed this. Should all three seats fall to the opposition, Najib may be seen as incapable of reversing the anti-BN trend that began with last year's general election. If this snowballs into the next polls, UMNO and the BN could be thrown out of power. Najib will not want to be the last prime minister from UMNO.

Najib's Challenges

The stakes have never be higher for the son of Malaysia's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak. His father became premier in 1970 at a time of crisis. The BN's predecessor, the Alliance, lost its two-thirds majority for the first time, leading to racial riots in 1969. Razak introduced emergency rule after succeeding Tunku Abdul Rahman who was heavily criticised for failing the Malays by UMNO's "Young Turks" then led by Mahathir. Razak then introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) to rectify the socio-economic imbalances amongst the races to appease the Malays.

Forty years later, Najib is inheriting this legacy -- also at a time of crisis. Politically, the ruling coalition has lost its two-thirds majority for the second time; ethnic tension is palpable while social cohesion is fraying. Economically, the country is staring at a deep recession while the NEP that his father conceived is being challenged for its shortcomings by a changing Malaysian electorate.

Najib will certainly not want to go down in history as presiding over a crumbling system. The task that he inherits from Abdullah is tough, though not beyond him. While he has to revive UMNO and defend its leadership of the ruling coalition, he has also to rally Malaysians of all races behind him. He has to be their leader as much as he is of UMNO and the Malays. Can he balance the seemingly competing demands? His response to this challenge is his "One Malaysia" project that aims to re-emphasise the sense of oneness amongst the various races. How will this vision reconcile UMNO's doctrine of *ketuanan Melayu* or Malay hegemony with the growing demands of the minorities for more space and liberties?

Given the highly demanding balancing act required of him, the temptation to play hard ball is strong. To some, the Najib that many people know -- seemingly soft-spoken and risk-averse -- has gone. A

new Najib seems to be emerging, one who is more like Mahathir than Abdullah. Case in point: the take-over of the Perak state government from the opposition that Najib is said to have engineered.

The new prime minister will have to endear himself to a new generation of youthful voters who will make up 40 percent of the electorate by the time the next general election is called. Notwithstanding the return of Mahathir to UMNO, the politics of pragmatism is likely to steer Najib away from the authoritarianism of the past. He will want to have his own imprimatur on this next phase of the country's political evolution.

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