

Walking a tightrope

Yang Razali Kassim

The Straits Times, 3 April 2009

ON MARCH 22, just before taking over as Umno president, Datuk Seri Najib Razak spoke to the Malaysian media.

With tongue half in cheek, he said he had noticed a new fad within Umno 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 Abdul Razak (Mr Najib's father and Malaysia's second prime minister) is back in fashion and that his time has become fashionable.'

Enter the Najib Era as the son of Tun Razak is sworn in today as Malaysia's sixth prime minister, succeeding Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. The Najib flavour has even gone into space, with the country's latest satellite named RazakSAT, after the late Tun Razak.

Mr Najib's rise has not been without controversy. He has, however, asked not to be prejudged.

Mr Najib has ushered in his leadership in aggressive style. Wasting no time, he has virtually hijacked the theme of reform from his nemesis, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, whose anti-corruption campaign partly contributed to his sacking from Umno in 1998.

Mr Najib's 'reform and transform' mantra is timely for Umno, which is seen by many within and without the party as under threat of decay.

But merely reversing the slide will not be enough. The renewal will have to be extended to the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition as a whole to be effective.

Mr Najib's stewardship has begun well with the election of a new Umno leadership and the successful wooing back into the fold of former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad who had quit Umno last year in protest against Mr Abdullah's policies. The closing of ranks was crucial.

Also crucial was that the public heard Umno concede for the first time that it could lose power if it failed to change its ways and uproot two ogres bedevilling it - money politics and power struggles.

Leadership elections will now be opened up to bypass traditional centres of money politics. Term limits for party office may be introduced. But can Mr Najib pull off such wide-ranging reforms?

Corruption is deeply entrenched in the party. Any attempt at a clean-up could provoke a backlash. Yet, Mr Najib has little choice.

In three years' time, another general election will have to be called. As things stand, Umno and its BN allies are not ready for the contest.

Would Mr Najib dare to call a snap general election now to secure the mandate that every new prime minister needs? That everyone knows this would be a big gamble testifies to the urgent need to reform Umno - and fast.

Umno's new leadership will be tested in three by-elections on April 7 - one each in Perak, Kedah and Sarawak. These by-elections will be seen as a referendum of sorts on Mr Najib's leadership, though he has dismissed such a reading.

Should all three seats fall to the opposition that will not be a good start to his premiership. He will be perceived as incapable of reversing the anti-BN trend that began with last year's general election. If this perception persists, it is conceivable that BN could be thrown out of power in the next general election. Mr Najib will not want to be the last prime minister from Umno.

His father also became prime minister during a time of acute crisis. BN's predecessor, the Alliance, had lost its two-thirds majority in the 1969 general election. That reversal led to racial riots on May 13 the same year.

An emergency was imposed, and Mr Razak succeeded Tunku Abdul Rahman, who had been criticised by Umno's 'Young Turks', then led by Tun Mahathir, for failing the Malays. Mr Razak introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) to rectify the socio-economic imbalances among the races to appease the Malays.

Forty years later, Mr Najib is inheriting this legacy, also at a time of crisis. The ruling coalition has lost its two-thirds majority for the second time; ethnic tensions are again palpable; social cohesion is fraying. The country is staring at a deep recession, while the NEP is being challenged over its shortcomings by a new electorate.

Mr Najib will certainly not want to go down in history as presiding over a crumbling system. The task that he inherits from Mr Abdullah is tough, though not beyond him. He has to revive Umno, defend its leadership of the ruling coalition and rally Malaysians of all races behind him. He has to be their leader as much as he is of the Malays.

Can he balance these seemingly competing demands? His 'One Malaysia' project 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 supremacy, with the growing demands of the minorities for more space?

The temptation to play hardball will be strong. To some, the Najib they once knew - seemingly gentle, not a risk-taker - has gone. A new Najib seems to be emerging - one who is more like Dr Mahathir than Mr Abdullah. Case in point: The BN's takeover of Perak state from the opposition that Mr Najib is said to have engineered.

Malaysia's new Prime Minister will have to find acceptance among a new generation of youthful voters, who will make up 40 per cent of the electorate by the time the next general election is called. Notwithstanding the return of Dr Mahathir to Umno, the politics of pragmatism is likely to steer Mr Najib away from the authoritarianism of the past. He will want his era to bear his own imprimatur.

What will it be?

The writer is a senior fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.