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UMNO GENERAL ASSEMBLY: Abdullah's new direction for the Malays

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The 55th General Assembly of Malaysia's premier ruling party, UMNO, was the first to be addressed by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi as party president. Having led the party and its Barisan Nasional coalition to an overwhelming victory in the general elections last March, Dato Abdullah was expected to preside over a celebration of his unchallengeable leadership. He sought to put his stamp on UMNO's direction with a policy speech that spelt out his vision of the role of Malay people in the era of globalisation and the place that Islam Hadhari would occupy in their life.

However the import of his policy address was lost on many of the 2,200 delegates who were more engrossed with the election of the party's vice-presidents and Supreme Council members. The results of the election shocked UMNO veterans as many stalwarts lost to lesser known candidates. While the defeated contestants cried foul and alleged "money politics" at play, others interpreted the results as a reminder to their new leader of the party's strong democratic tradition. The delegates had the power to elect, check and change their leaders every three years. Observers however wonder if the setbacks dealt to candidates said to be close to Abdullah were a warning that he had rough road ahead. Will Abdullah be able to stand his ground and shape the political landscape the way he wants or will he succumb to other contrarian forces?

Some of those forces could be discerned in the booing that Abdullah's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin received when he was introduced as uncontested Deputy Head of UMNO Youth, and the large number of votes received by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's son Mukhriz, in the election for the youth wing's executive council. Dr Mahathir himself was given a standing ovation when he was mentioned at the assembly opening. Were these reminders that supporters of Dr Mahathir, who led UMNO and the country for 22 years, were still forces to be reckoned with in UMNO? Was the resurgence of vote-buying by some UMNO leaders a rebuff for Abdullah's much vaunted crackdown on corruption?

PM Abdullah made it clear that notwithstanding the great pressures on him he would pursue his own leadership style. He warned that while he preferred the gentle and conciliatory touch – self-deprecatingly describing himself as "si lembik" or "softie" – he should not be underestimated. In a closed-door meeting with UMNO delegates before the assembly, he made it known that he knew the meaning of power and would have no qualms using it to enforce his leadership. In his closing address Abdullah reiterated this point by obliquely warning the party not to test his resolve.

Indeed events in September surrounding the general assembly have required Abdullah to stiffen his resolve and marshal his strength to contend with other power centres who seek to define the political calculus in the months ahead. One of these is former Deputy Prime Minister and UMNO Deputy President Anwar Ibrahim, who was released from prison on 2 September after the Court of Appeals overturned his conviction for sodomy. Anwar's release, which took many UMNO leaders by surprise, sparked off intense speculation that he would be readmitted to UMNO, from which he was expelled in Sept 1998. Also fuelling suspicion of a "deal" between Anwar and Abdullah was the "family visit" paid by Khairy to Anwar immediately after his release.

Even though Abdullah had stated that UMNO's door on Anwar's return was shut "for now", concern

about such a reconciliation between Abdullah and his erstwhile rival Anwar spurred hardline groups to mount a campaign against the latter. Pamphlets flooded the UMNO convention halls prodding the Supreme Council to take a clear stand to prevent Anwar's return. The strong sentiments against treacherous "traitors" to the party surfaced at the UMNO Youth and Women assembly, when Deputy PM Najib Tun Razak, Youth leader Hishamuddin Tun Hussein and Women Chief Rafidah Aziz, lead the attack against Anwar's return. Those most strident were the same key players who pushed for Anwar's ouster in 1998, and found mainly among supporters of Tun Mahathir, who insisted that he was right in sacking his former deputy and friend on grounds of being "morally unfit". It was perhaps not coincidental that in the UMNO elections those seen as close to Anwar were beaten or received less votes, among them Vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin, who was barely re-elected in third place after two lesser figures, Federal Affairs Minister Isa Mohamad Samad and Malacca Chief Minister Ali Rustam.

Although Anwar himself has said he would remain with the Opposition, pundits do not rule him out from returning to UMNO after the next general election in 2009 and being in contention for the presidency should that happen. While Najib is the most likely successor to Abdullah and his cousin, Hishamuddin, is seen as a future Deputy to Najib, the pundits reckon that Anwar could upset the power balance should he make a comeback, as his supporters make up about one-third of the party membership.

Given his age, Abdullah, 65, will need to prepare for the succession over the next three terms of his presidency. Should he step down in nine years' time Najib would be 60. The catch is that UMNO's history is full of No. 2 men not making it to the top post. Najib has no desire to join the pantheon of former deputies and has studiously declared his loyalty to PM Abdullah, assuring him in no uncertain terms that he was "not the type who will stab you in the back."

While Najib sees the premiership as his destiny he has been careful not to be presumptuous. Saying that Abdullah and he seemed destined to come together to lead the country he said just as Abdullah had served his father, PM Tun Razak in 1969 as Secretary of the National Operations Council now it was his turn to be a loyal and faithful deputy to Abdullah as PM. His assurances of support for Abdullah would not only consolidate the Abdullah-Najib partnership it would reduce the chances of Abdullah turning to Anwar for support should he feel his position being challenged.

While the return of Anwar to UMNO cannot be ruled out his future role has yet to be determined. For now he seems to be playing the role of an Asian Nelson Mandela, leveraging on his media popularity to talk about inter-religious harmony and inter-civilizational dialogue. When he does make a political comeback he might not need UMNO for his political vehicle but remain on the outside as a formidable challenger to whoever is at the top of UMNO. Until then, UMNO leaders have sought to close ranks behind the slogan "Hidup Melayu" and pursue the reforms that their new president, Abdullah, has earmarked as part of Islam Hadhari to lead the Malays to further progress in a globalised world and with their non-Malay compatriots, become truly a Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nation).

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