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UMNO General Assembly 2009: Najib in Charge

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Prime Minister Najib Razak is in firm control of UMNO and is seeking to transform the party and recover popular support for the Barisan Nasional from the non-Malays in Malaysia. But in reaching out to them, the government is unlikely to make any radical change to its bumiputra policy.

THERE HAVE been two main observations on the recently-concluded UMNO Annual General Assembly (14-16 Oct 2009) in Kuala Lumpur. Firstly, the gathering was a call by Prime Minister and party president Naji Razak for UMNO to take a new direction politically. Secondly, the UMNO assembly showed that Najib was in charge and in control of the party.

Opening Up UMNO

In his address to UMNO delegates on 15 October, Najib declared that UMNO had to capture the imagination of all Malaysians and not be a party “that only champions a small group”. It was a call for UMNO to go beyond fighting for Malay rights and be more “inclusive”. It was also in keeping with the ‘1Malaysia’ concept to unify the country that Najib initiated soon after becoming prime minister on 3 April this year. ‘1Malaysia’ is essentially an idealised picture of Malaysia as a united, racially harmonious and progressive nation that the government is relentlessly promoting. Its main intent is to improve the standing of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, with the non-Malays.

Indeed, concrete measures toward this objective have been undertaken. For example, educational assistance to Tamil schools has been increased and a new public scholarship scheme will be launched that would be “100% based on merit” – which means it will be race blind. This would be a radical departure from current practice. The cabinet even ventured into the sensitive area of religion. In June it sought to introduce legislation to protect the interests of children and spouses in cases where one parent had converted to Islam. But the effort had to be postponed as the Conference of Malay Rulers wanted the relevant bills to be examined by the state religious authorities.

Balancing the Bumiputra Policy

While the BN may do more in addressing the concerns of the non-Malays in Malaysia, it remains to be seen whether the 1Malaysia concept or UMNO's new inclusiveness will lead to any radical change in the bumiputra policy of affirmative action. Even as the government has taken measures calculated to win the approval of non-Malays; it has been careful to leave the impression that Malays will continue to be looked after. For instance, on 30 June the government took a bold move to remove the requirement for companies doing a public listing to reserve 30% of shares for bumiputras, the term referring to the Malays and other indigenous people who are given special assistance. However, at the same time, it announced the setting up of a government-financed equity fund (Ekuinas) to nurture bumiputra companies.

That measure was duly highlighted at the UMNO conference by the leader of UMNO Youth Khairy Jamaluddin as a new approach in the government's assistance to the Malays. While the bumiputra policy will no doubt stay on, UMNO's 'inclusive' strategy does signify a change in UMNO at the leadership level as far as pacifying the Malay ground is concerned. But it does show an appreciation of non-Malay grievances and is a tacit admission that the bumiputra policy has been taken to excess and has to be re-defined.

A Malaysian columnist has written that Najib had "come unto his own" at the UMNO general assembly. The best indication of this was the smooth passage of a significant reform --- a resolution to increase the electoral college for top party posts from 2,510 to 146,500 delegates so as to discourage vote-buying in UMNO leadership elections. The resolution was adopted at the assembly without any dissent. Since taking over from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as UMNO president, Najib has been placing his loyalists as party heads in a few states. Najib's control of UMNO is also facilitated by the absence of any formidable UMNO leader below him. The other important figures below Najib, Deputy President Muhyiddin Yassin or UMNO Vice-President Hishamuddin Hussein (who is Najib's cousin) do not have a reputation or standing that can be said to rival Najib's.

Leader who Can Get Things Done

While Najib's grip on UMNO is secure, his image as the country's PM can be said to be lacking for one who has arrived as a leader. If anything, the initial public perception of Najib was negative given the allegations surrounding the murder of Altantuya, the Mongolian translator, who was linked to a close aide of Najib. However Najib's long experience in government and politics, since getting into politics at the age of 23, means that he probably has a better understanding than anyone else in BN of the system over which he now presides.

He may not inspire but he is good at working behind the scenes and getting things done, even if the moves required may not be quite cricket. For instance, Najib was said to be behind the BN's controversial re-taking of the Perak state government from the opposition Pakatan Rakyat through the defection of three Pakatan state legislators. Little wonder then that the Penang chief minister Lim Guan Eng recently conceded that Najib will be harder for the opposition to take on than Abdullah Badawi. Guan Eng noted that Najib "can get things done better than Abdullah".

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