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Najib's UMNO: Gearing Up for Early Elections?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The just-concluded UMNO general assembly has thrown up a more assertive leader in Najib Razak. While he may be winning back his doubters in UMNO, can he recover the non-Malay ground as he prepares for an early general election?

Commentary

IS PRIME Minister Najib Razak gearing up for a snap general election? By the end of the 61st general assembly last weekend, this guessing game went up a notch higher as the premier, who is also UMNO president, signaled that the next national polls may be just round the corner. He, however, left the exact timing open to various interpretations. But his predecessor and elder statesman, Mahathir Mohamad, doubted whether UMNO was ready for snap elections.

Apparently, while Najib himself is confident, others around him are still hesitant about calling early polls. They want to be absolutely certain that the premier could recapture the two-thirds majority that was denied by the opposition at the last general election in 2008.

Still, the speculation has narrowed down to the next nine months, with the cut-off point being the Sarawak state elections, which must be called by July next year. A snap federal election could be timed with it, although this need not be called until 2013. In June this year, Najib had publicly not ruled out a "surprise" general election. The outcomes of the two current by-elections in Galas, Kelantan and Batu Sapi, Sabah will also decide the timing. A BN win in one or both could quicken it. A defeat could see a delay.

Signs of Early Elections

Regardless, Najib is now shifting gear and preparing his troops for electoral battle. A sure sign of this new phase: he did not evade media questions on the possibility of early polls, saying this time "you can interpret it in many ways". Secondly, he dropped broad hints that there would be a series of steps he would take before calling for elections. These steps presumably would include his move to shake up UMNO's leadership especially at the ground level, which he said would be very soon; the announcement that he and his deputy would be making the rounds of all UMNO divisions, also very soon; and the unveiling of more details of the national Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) immediately after the party assembly.

The ETP is designed to take the economy towards developed economy status by 2020. It revealed a revival of foreign direct investments and promised to create three million new jobs over the next 10 years. In unveiling this, Najib displayed his capacity not only as a political leader but also a premier who could realise Mahathir's 2020 vision of Malaysia as a developed economy. Mahathir had earlier endorsed Najib's more assertive stance as an UMNO president.

But the clearest sign of Najib's readiness to go into elections is the nation-wide tour of UMNO's various divisions during which he could weed out "the enemies within" – ground-level leaders whose loyalty to the party has been suspect. Traditionally, when UMNO leaders make this round, it is the final signal for battle.

The just-concluded UMNO general assembly therefore was the curtain-raiser to the last phase into the next general election. And Najib was clearly playing up the UMNO card. He galvanised the party by displaying his credentials as a Malay leader who has not lost touch with the party's Malay agenda. In recent months, his vision of 1Malaysia has raised doubts about his commitment to the special position of the Malays, giving rise to the strident Malay rights group Perkasa, which Mahathir had backed. He also tackled head-on dissension within the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) ruling coalition over issues relating to Malay rights. He especially admonished the leader of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) Chua Soi Lek for sounding like the opposition in pressing for a review of Malay rights. Reassuring the UMNO members, he stated to thunderous applause: How could he not be committed to the New Economic Policy which his own father, Tun Razak, introduced 40 years ago?

Constitution and Rights

In the process, Najib pressed home several major points that harked back to the fundamentals of nation-building in the federal constitution. The constitution, he said, protected and preserved the rights of all communities as embodied in the "national social contract" as agreed by the country's ethnic leaders leading to independence. He assured the Malays that no amount of debate would lead to a review of their special position without the consent of the nine Malay rulers – even if the opposition captured two-thirds majority and formed the government. Equally, the rights of the non-Malays are protected by the constitution and therefore would not be eroded.

He urged UMNO, as the dominant party, not to be provoked by the pressures. Instead UMNO should be confident of itself and take the centrist path by being inclusive and accommodating towards all communities. For this, he even sounded more like a leader from the opposition PAS when he advocated the Islamic centrist doctrine of *wassatiyyah* – or Middle Way.

To top it all, Najib defended his 1Malaysia vision as nothing new but a continuation of the spirit of the federal constitution and the social contract amongst the major races. By tying his 1Malaysia to the social contract, Najib silenced his critics that he was laying the ground for a recalibration of the power equation amongst the various communities.

Recapturing the Non-Malay Ground

After 18 months at the helm, Najib seems to be emerging as a more assertive leader poised to go into electoral battle, especially now that the opposition is weakened by internal strife. Questions however remain whether the BN which he also leads is ready. Internal dissension with the non-Malay component partners does not appear to be receding.

Najib may be winning the UMNO ground, but can he swing back the broader Malaysian electorate? How will the non-Malay minorities react to a PM who is more assertive of Malay rights? It was their desertion of BN in 2008 that led to the growing pro-opposition sentiment and a restructuring of the political landscape. By playing the UMNO card, however, Najib appears to be giving more weight to the Malay vote, even if it means losing more of the non-Malay ground. He is taking a calculated risk. In the end, he seems to believe, it is the Malay electorate that will still be the anchor of the political system. And that is where UMNO is entrenched.

Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.