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UMNO's 61st General Assembly: Playing to the Gallery?

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Synopsis

Prime Minister Najib Razak defended Malay special rights when addressing the 61st UMNO General Assembly. He was seeking to protect his own standing in UMNO and to rally the party to face the next general election.

Commentary

MALAYSIAN PRIME Minister Najib Razak's opening address on 21 October 2010 to UMNO delegates attending the 61st UMNO General Assembly was significantly different from the speech he delivered at the same meeting a year ago. Then a confident Najib, fresh from a by-election victory in a multiracial constituency in Negri Sembilan, gave a forward-looking speech urging UMNO to change and become a party not just for the Malays but for all Malaysians. This year his speech was defensive, focussing on the past, urging on all to honour the "social contract" forged at the time of independence for non-Malays to be given Malaysian citizenship in exchange for special rights for the Malays and other Bumiputras. Last year, Najib's speech was about UMNO becoming more inclusive. This year it was a defence of Malay rights and privileges. Why the change?

Najib's Standing

The reason probably was that Najib's own standing and influence were at stake this time. After taking over as PM in April 2009, he had introduced a few measures -- such as a new merit-based education scholarship programme and the removal of the requirement for companies doing a public listing to reserve 30% of shares for Bumiputras -- that gave the impression that he would begin to play down affirmative action for the Malays in his policies. The measures, just like Najib's 1Malaysia campaign that was seen as reaching out to non-Malays, did not go down well in UMNO. They soon led to the activation of a Malay-rights NGO, Perkasa, that began to actively posture for the preservation of economic and other privileges for the Malays.

Perkasa, and its combative leader, Ibrahim Ali, an independent MP, proved to be more than just an irritant to Najib's grand vision of a more inclusive, forward-looking UMNO. Perkasa had an influential patron in former premier Mahathir Mohamad. Few UMNO leaders were willing to take it on and defend Najib's policies, while some were quietly supporting it. Political commentators were even saying that Perkasa was threatening UMNO's role as the defender of Malay rights. Najib was initially neutral to Perkasa but probably became uncomfortable as it grew more active.

In September, the UMNO Secretary-General, Tengku Adnan Mansor declared in a press interview that Perkasa leaders were not wanted in UMNO, that most of them had been defeated in the last party elections and wanted a platform to be heard. It was the strongest attack on Perkasa by an UMNO leader and there was speculation that UMNO was taking a tougher line on Perkasa at Najib's behest.

But Tengku Adnan was to backtrack on what he said about Perkasa when the NGO, supported by an association of former UMNO elected representatives, wanted Najib to remove him as UMNO Secretary-General. Under pressure, Najib had also quietly yielded, noting publicly that UMNO was not in conflict with Perkasa or any other NGO. (The opposition was quick to condemn the statement as "damage control" and a "flip-flop" by Najib.) His defence of Malay rights at last week's UMNO assembly was thus a way of mending fences with the hardline elements in UMNO, whom Perkasa represents, and who seem to reflect the mood of UMNO members at the present time. Not surprisingly, Mahathir was all praise for Najib's latest speech.

Social Contract

In his address at the UMNO assembly, Najib said that the special position of the Malays represented a "social contract" among the various races, enshrined in articles in the Federal Constitution that even a government with a two-thirds majority could not change without the approval of the Malay rulers. He defended affirmative action for the Malays and warned of serious conflict if the "social contract" among the races continued to be questioned. Najib was rather defensive of his 1Malaysia campaign emphasising that it was not something new and that his predecessors had also sought to nurture national unity. In his closing speech, Najib revealed that the government had recently formed a new high-level Bumiputra Agenda Council chaired by him to monitor Bumiputra progress.

Najib's address at the UMNO assembly seemed to elicit a warmer, more genuine response from the delegates than his speech last year. However, while Najib's speech went down well with UMNO, it is unlikely to be popular with the non-Malays, particularly the Chinese, the constituency that slipped from the government's grasp in the last general election in 2008.

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