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UMNO's New Page: After Najib vs Muhyiddin

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The ongoing UMNO general assembly is proving heated amid the twin scandals of 1MDB and party political donation. However it ends, a new page is being opened in the tumultuous history of UMNO.

Commentary

THE 2015 UMNO General Assembly this week turns a new page in the party's tumultuous history. It was marked by a tussle between the top two leaders triggered by the twin scandals of 1MDB and political donation affecting the prime minister and UMNO president Najib Razak. Even as the assembly started today (10 Dec 2015) the delegates appeared to be rallying behind the embattled president, while his loyal deputy turned critic, former Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, was further sidelined. Najib's plan to sack him appeared to have been delayed if not pushed back with Muhyiddin retaining his post for now.

Denied his traditional platform to speak as party deputy president, Muhyiddin created an alternative gathering of supporters on 7 December with what amounted to his own "pre-assembly curtain raiser." Complete with the UMNO flag and anthem and telecast live online, Muhyiddin made a forceful address "to save UMNO" at a rally at the Sultan Sulaiman Club, UMNO's birthplace in 1946, accompanied by former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamed. Speaking as if it was his last stand, Muhyiddin called on Najib to step down temporarily to make way for transparent and independent investigations into the twin scandals – the 1MDB issue and the RM2.6 billion political donation that ended in his personal account. Najib could resume his post, Muhyiddin said, once cleared of wrong-doing. Criticising Najib for creating a "climate of fear" and turning dictatorial by clamping down on those who dared take

issue with his leadership, Muhyiddin called for a two-term limit to the tenure of the UMNO president.

Unavoidable or expected curtain-raiser?

Najib's response was swift. In an interview with media chiefs timed for the assembly, he declared his conscience "absolutely clear" as "I have not committed any offence both in law and in manner". Zahid Hamidi, a vice-president who took over Muhyiddin's post of deputy premier, warned Muhyiddin against "crossing the line" and splintering the party. Zahid's reference to splintering could foreshadow the possible sacking of Muhyiddin from his party post. If that comes to pass, UMNO is looking at a new split, possibly leading to the exodus of Muhyiddin and his supporters.

Backed by Mahathir and a vice-president, Shafie Apdal, Muhyiddin seems resigned to this, while Mahathir said that "no risk, no gain". Muhyiddin had earlier been dropped as deputy prime minister after going public with his concerns over the negative impact of the twin scandals on the party and government. Making clear he meant no malice, he said it was his duty as a Muslim leader to speak out as he feared UMNO could be dragged to court if the current crisis ended up as a legal case against Najib. Muhyiddin had claimed that despite his pressing for clarifications via various internal channels, the response from Najib had neither been sufficient nor satisfactory. Najib preceded his sacking with yet-to-be-proven claims of a conspiracy to oust him from power, thus making Muhyiddin the third deputy prime minister in three decades to clash with their boss – after Musa Hitam in the 1980s and Anwar Ibrahim in the 1990s.

Forced into the defensive, Najib briefed the 191 party division heads behind closed-doors on the RM2.6 billion political donation. Muhyiddin's supporters meanwhile lodged a complaint to the Registrar of Societies to investigate why the donation was not reflected in the party's account as required by regulations. Mahathir had decided to attend the assembly to see for himself whether the donation would now be reported in the party's financial statement. In his opening address today Najib vowed to press on in his post, calling on the delegates to unite and rally behind the leadership.

Two possible outcomes

This week's UMNO gathering could end in two alternative outcomes: If the first - the possible axing of Muhyiddin as party deputy president – comes to pass, it would make his ouster complete. It would end a leadership stint over many decades as the most senior political leader from the highly strategic state of Johor. It is unlikely that UMNO Johor has been unaffected. Even the Sultan of Johor is said to be concerned and had intimated symbolic support for Muhyiddin after he was sacked - with a photo opportunity at his palace.

If Muhyiddin is dropped as party Number 2, he could be thrown into the political wilderness. But if Muhyiddin chose to fight on, he could either initiate, or be forced into, a new political calculus - with or without the opposition. If so, how this may shape up is still unclear, maybe even for Muhyiddin himself. But if Mahathir joins him

in the exodus from UMNO, the implications on Malaysian politics will be far-reaching, reminiscent of the 1987 split between Team A and Team B, which led to the formation of Semangat 46 led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Test of wills and competing narratives

Reflecting the growing restiveness, Muhyiddin in his rally speech claimed that his Facebook account had attracted many likes, including growing calls for Najib to be replaced. While the majority of delegates to the assembly are pro-Najib, Muhyiddin is not without his supporters and sympathisers, many of whom have chosen to lie low for now. By and large, however, most delegates would prefer this dilemma be resolved without splitting UMNO. Youth leader Khairy Jamaluddin said in his opening address that it's "damned if you do, damned if you don't". But there is a "trust deficit" among the people that must be "resolved at all costs". Both the Youth and Women wings of UMNO came out in support of Najib after their respective assemblies, presaging a similar outcome by the main assembly. But the warm applause that Muhyiddin received when he turned up at the meeting of the young women's wing suggested that Najib should not take his deputy lightly.

Much now depends on how the delegates are influenced by the ongoing test of wills between Najib and Muhyiddin and their competing narratives: Muhyiddin is taking the moral high ground; he is appealing to the conscience of the delegates to save UMNO by "removing the cancer" that is seriously threatening the party with a defeat at next general election to be called by 2018. "Will the crisis end if they sack me?" he stated in his 7 December pitch.

Najib's counter-narrative is to make the typically Malay appeal to party unity and loyalty to the leadership to solidify UMNO ahead of GE2018. Zahid Hamidi, playing down the threat of a split, said "one loose rope" will not sink the UMNO ship. Meanwhile calls have emerged for party elections to be quickened. UMNO is once again going through an excruciating moment. This week's UMNO assembly will determine how well the party will fight the next general election.

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