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Malaysian Politics: 'Mother of All Battles' Shaping Up

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Malaysia's besieged leader Najib Razak claims to have turned around his political fortunes despite the 1MDB scandal. While UMNO is increasingly confident of facing the coming general election, the ground may be far from sweet.

Commentary

THE MOTHER of all battles is shaping up in Malaysian politics as beleaguered prime minister Najib Razak pulled out all stops to defend himself in the face of a reconfiguring opposition. Putting his dominant party, UMNO, on a war footing at its recently concluded annual general assembly, Najib resorted to the Islamic doctrine of *wala'* - or loyalty to the leader - as he manoeuvred to rally support and ready UMNO for a general election.

The enabler was his Number 2, Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi who started the ball rolling by pledging his own loyalty to Najib, who has been under siege since the outbreak of the 1MDB scandal last year. UMNO for the first time had to ward off an uprising against a sitting president led by a former prime minister and party president. In a single-minded drive to push Najib out, Mahathir Mohamad is leading a "people's movement" to "Save Malaysia". Having resigned from UMNO in protest against Najib, Mahathir has joined the opposition, even reconciling with his former ally-turned-nemesis Anwar Ibrahim to revive their once powerful political partnership.

Najib's Survival Strategy

Mahathir is now demonised as a traitor who would even sleep with the enemy, the

Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), to destroy UMNO, the Malay party he once led. The trigger that launched Mahathir on this warpath is 1MDB which has implicated Najib despite his denial of wrongdoing. The scandal has energised the divided opposition as well as Najib's critics, culminating in the departure from UMNO of Mahathir and three other leaders, including deputy prime minister and UMNO deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin. All three have formed a new party PPBM, also known for short as Bersatu.

This new party is set to join the Anwar-inspired Pakatan Harapan, formerly known as Pakatan Rakyat. This could strengthen the opposition coalition out to topple Najib, along with UMNO and the ruling national front coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN). It is this prospect of a reconstituted opposition coalition led in spirit and form by the two formidable former foes – Mahathir and Anwar – that caused Zahid to predict an epic clash. “We have to work triple-hard than previous elections because the mother of all battles will be in this coming elections,” he told the MalayMail in an interview. Another UMNO leader, the chief minister of Johor state, has described the coming general election as a “battle for survival”.

With his back to the wall, Najib's strategy for survival has transformed him from a gentlemanly politician to an almost unrecognisable political animal. At the outbreak of the 1MDB scandal, he swiftly removed key senior officials who were not on his side, including the attorney-general, before sacking his chief critic, the deputy premier Muhyiddin. 1MDB has now grown into an international scandal as several governments launched probes where the financial fiasco affected their jurisdictions; yet at the UMNO general assembly over the weekend, 1MDB was hardly an issue as the entire party's attention was deflected towards the impending general election.

Rohingya Issue

Najib the Malay nationalist then burnished his credentials as an Islamic leader by latching on to the latest humanitarian crisis on the Rohingya in Myanmar, which came at an opportune time for him. Usually cautious when making his moves and choosing his words, Najib was a different persona at the Rohingya solidarity rally the next day.

He did the unprecedented in ASEAN: He brushed aside a warning by Myanmar not to interfere in the country's internal affairs. Upset that his foreign minister was turned away by Aung San Suu Kyi when he sought bilateral talks on the issue, Najib declared a limit to the ASEAN principle of non-interference when it came to human rights abuses. He even ticked off Suu Kyi for not living up to her name as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, while urging Indonesian president Joko Widodo to mobilise a larger rally in support of the Rohingya: “Enough is enough!” he said. “They want me to close my eyes? Shut my mouth? I will not keep quiet. We will defend them (the Rohingya)!”

Billed as the Muslim Ummah Solidarity Rally for the Rohingya, it was clearly not just to show solidarity with the persecuted Rohingya, thousands of whom have taken refuge in Malaysia. It was also to showcase solidarity between UMNO and PAS, the Islamist opposition which Najib has been trying hard to woo. Indeed, this was a

showcase moment - of him on stage together with the opposition Islamist PAS leader, Hadi Awang.

In coming together to support the Rohingya, UMNO and PAS have signalled their converging political interests. While this does not necessarily mean they would end up as formal allies in the coming elections, it does raise the prospect of an electoral pact. The more UMNO can win PAS over, the lesser the chances of the Pakatan Harapan opposition getting stronger. ASEAN will now have to contain the political fallout on the diplomatic and regional fronts.

The Mood Outside UMNO

Najib is clearly overflowing with confidence. UMNO leaders claimed the party had turned the corner and was now solidly behind him. While this may be so, it is too early to say if UMNO is completely out of the woods, going by publicly-aired sentiments. One came from a recent press conference by an UMNO Youth leader who quit the party after he was suspended for allegedly trying to “sabotage Najib” by attempting to provide Mahathir with a speaking platform.

It was not so much the Youth leader’s resignation but what he said. He said many more were standing behind him and claimed there would be “busloads” who would leave UMNO in “managed waves”. This would build up to the general election that is widely expected to be quickened to next year, before the fractured opposition could consolidate.

On a broader note, while UMNO may still be the dominant Malay party, it is no longer regarded as the sole representative of the Malay community’s political aspirations. Outside UMNO - indeed outside the Malay community - the mood may be in stark contrast. A recent article by a former senior civil servant and now a think-tank senior, Ramon Navaratnam, was telling. He warned of a “serious disconnect” between UMNO leaders and the wider Malaysian public.

Ramon wondered whether the UMNO leaders’ confidence and happiness was “shared by all Malays and Bumiputeras and especially, most Malaysians, including non-Malays and non-Muslims”. “Prime Minister Najib Razak and UMNO leaders are generally confident of the future, but are Malaysians happy too?” He listed five sources of discontent – inflation, corruption, unemployment, human rights, and deteriorating safety and security. The chairman of the ASLI Centre for Public Policy Studies said: “Malaysia’s public confidence by any measure is now low and declining...This is causing much loss of public confidence and unhappiness, which all political leaders must address expeditiously, before it’s too late for the 14th general election.”

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