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UMNO Post-Power: What Now in a Changing Landscape?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Soon after its historic defeat in the 9 May 2018 general election, the long-dominant UMNO held its first party elections over the weekend. The much subdued contest for the presidency and other leadership positions, unlike the glitz and glamour of previous party polls, reflects the cloud the party is under. Will UMNO survive post-power?

Commentary

IN A TRIP to Kuala Lumpur, I caught up with a close friend, a former adviser to then premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Our conversation was generally about life in a changing political landscape, as the euphoria over the recent epochal general election continued to subside. The subject soon veered to what Abdullah had told this adviser after the premier was compelled to step down following the 2008 general election in which the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) under him lost much ground.

In the nature of evolution, the former prime minister said, there were four phases in the rise and fall of states and entities: *kesedaran* (awareness), *kebangkitan* (emergence), *kegemilangan* (greatness) and *kehancuran* (decline and disintegration). When asked what phase he saw UMNO to be in then, Abdullah told the adviser: the last one – of decline and disintegration. It would take another decade, or two more general elections coinciding with the premiership of his successor, Najib Razak, before this prognosis proved to be an indisputable fact.

UMNO Post-Power

In the recent 14th general election (GE14) on 9 May 2018, UMNO was toppled after being at the helm since independence – along with the scandal-tainted Najib and the UMNO-led BN coalition. In its place had arisen a new regime, on the back of a peaceful

ballot-box uprising driven by people power. This new force, Pakatan Harapan (PH) – Alliance of Hope – is led by two former leaders Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim whose joint return to national politics is causing a political earthquake.

Once mighty and dominant, UMNO is now in the throes of an existential crisis; even the dozen-strong BN coalition has quickly crumbled like a house of cards, leaving only the original core of the three-party ethnic-based Alliance, the other two being the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The fate of MCA and MIC in what remains of BN is also uncertain as Malaysian politics is thrown into a whirlpool of realignment of forces and loyalties following the 9 May sea-change.

Against this backdrop, UMNO's party elections over the weekend, on 30 June 2018, were superfluous, if not irrelevant, even meaningless. A new president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, has been voted in, but he has inherited an albatross around his neck left behind by Najib. A series of more humiliations may be ahead: First, the stark possibility of UMNO's deregistration.

This would not have come about had the party not been over-confident and arrogant while in power - that it could delay its internal elections as it liked, even in breach of its own constitution. The tactic backfired badly on UMNO after it tried to deregister Mahathir's fledgling political party, Bersatu, a key component of PH, then in the opposition. A group of UMNO members sued their own party for not doing what the Registrar of Societies (ROS) demanded others to do. It's a case of the local saying: *senjata makan tuan* (the weapon turning on its owner).

Second, its former president, Najib, who was prime minister until he was deposed on 9 May, is about to be dragged to court and could face jail time if found guilty of transgressions in the 1MDB scandal. Third, the party's accounts have already been frozen pending investigations over 1MDB, something not done before.

No wonder the party polls over the weekend were a subdued affair. The new president himself was hauled up for questioning – as soon as he was elected. It would not be surprising if more UMNO leaders were called in by the authorities.

If UMNO is deregistered, Zahid will be a leader without a party and UMNO members will be scampering, looking for a new house. What are the options for an UMNO out of power, amid a changing political landscape?

Possible Scenarios

A few options are possible, depending on whether UMNO survives, or not. If it is closed down, members' natural instinct would be to turn to parties based on similar Malay and Muslim identities. This means either PPBM (also known as Bersatu) led by Prime Minister Mahathir; or the Islamist PAS of Hadi Awang, or somewhere in between, namely Anwar Ibrahim's People's Justice Party (PKR), or even Amanah, the PAS breakaway.

Bersatu is most likely to gain because it is an UMNO carbon copy, another breakaway – a feature of the new landscape. But Mahathir has declared no

cooperation with UMNO, and no open doors to PH for former UMNO leaders; lower-ranked members can join but must first resign from UMNO.

An influx into Bersatu will actually boost Mahathir's weak political base in a PH coalition dominated by Anwar's PKR and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). But it will also introduce some nervousness for the other PH parties who have always known Mahathir as a domineering figure whose tendency to be autocratic has, however, been moderated through a system of checks and balances.

But UMNO may well resurrect itself by borrowing from Mahathir's own playbook on political survival. The party had been deregistered previously in 1988 following a power struggle when Mahathir was party president. Mahathir then formed a new party called UMNO Baru (New UMNO), absorbed all his supporters and subsequently rebadged it as simply "UMNO" (dropping the prefix "New"). The UMNO that is now facing possible deregistration is in fact the reconstituted UMNO of old. Such is the convolution that Malaysian politics has become.

Surviving in a New Landscape: UMNO 3.0?

Zahid has flashed his early survival instincts. His first message as president is that he would 'rebrand' UMNO and BN. Rebranding is not the same as reforming, though, so it remains to be seen how deep this attempt at change would be. If the original UMNO was 'UMNO 1.0', and the reconstituted party of 1998 was 'UMNO 2.0', he said, then the new UMNO to emerge soon would be 'UMNO 3.0'.

In the same vein, the Alliance that was formed pre-independence in 1952 was 'BN 1.0'. The BN that was formed in 1973 by Najib's father, then Prime Minister Tun Razak, was 'BN 2.0'; so the rebranded UMNO could see 'BN 3.0' after talks with MCA and MIC. But BN 3.0, he said, needed to be "grounded on (the) reality" of the "existence of various races, religions and languages that will help form the rebranding". "UMNO will remain the backbone (of BN 3.0)," said Zahid in his first media conference as president.

Should 'UMNO 3.0' indeed emerge, Zahid is likely to want to forge new alliances or coalitions. It will be tough. It is significant that he had underscored the country's polyglot reality. It remains to be seen how far he would go as he navigates between remaining a communal party and opening up and reaching out to a multi-ethnic national constituency – something debated within UMNO following its fall from power.

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