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## Najib's Reduced Sentence a Reflection of UMNO's Continuing Influence?

*By Aaron Denison Deivasagayam*

### SYNOPSIS

*Former Prime Minister Najib Razak's reduced prison sentence from twelve years to six sparked outrage among many people, particularly among urbanites, raising concerns about Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's commitment to [reformasi](#). As for the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the decision was neither fully satisfying nor too bad an outcome. The surprise, however, was the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) muted response to the decision in addition to the Perikatan Nasional's (PN) failure to use this decision as an opportunity to rebrand itself as a reliable opposition coalition. Does this demonstrate UMNO's strong influence in Malaysian politics?*

### COMMENTARY

The announcement by the Pardons Board on [2 February 2024](#) reducing former Prime Minister Najib Razak's prison sentence from twelve years to six was an inevitable challenge that Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim had to face to secure the government's status quo. This was due to UMNO's enduring influence in Malaysian politics and the present unity government, despite its weakened electoral position.

Although the unity government holds a two-thirds majority, the 30 UMNO lawmakers within the coalition have the potential to significantly influence the unity government's success or failure. Deputy Prime Minister, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, as leader of UMNO, needed to provide some evidence to Najib's supporters within the party that actions were being taken on Najib's pardon process. Anwar, while acknowledging his role in expediting Najib's pardon request, refuted claims that his decision was influenced by pressure from UMNO.

## **Anwar Needing to Balance UMNO's Influence**

Although Anwar's unity government framed the decision of the Pardons Board as a royal prerogative, it is quite evident that political considerations – particularly the influence of UMNO – had influenced the decision.

Anwar, as a former UMNO man, had to handle the situation delicately given Najib's status as the son of a former Prime Minister and a prominent political figure within the party. But granting Najib a full pardon would have opened the floodgates within Anwar's own Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition and supporters. To satisfy both sides, a reduced sentence for Najib, although not much of a win-win situation, was acceptable for the time being.

Anwar needed to also show UMNO supporters that the unity government had tried hard to get Najib a full pardon but this was the best that they could do. There were also negative reactions from PH supporters, a knock that Anwar had to take because his unity government was at the mercy of UMNO.

Even Zahid faced criticism from dissenting voices in UMNO, particularly from Najib's [loyal supporters](#) within the party who voiced their [disappointment](#) over the decision, but Zahid's task to explain the decision to the party was made easier because the decision by the Pardons Board had partially addressed the demands of the UMNO grassroots.

This episode highlights UMNO's significant influence in the Malaysian political landscape, particularly in shaping the government's decisions regarding Najib's pardon despite Anwar's denial. The latter had to cautiously navigate the current political dynamics to prevent potential disruptions if pressure from the UMNO grassroots intensifies.

## **Zahid's Efforts to Consolidate Position**

While Zahid appeared to be dissatisfied with the decision by calling for an emergency Supreme Council meeting a day after the official announcement by the Pardons Board, it was merely a put-on by Zahid and his allies in the Supreme Council.

Zahid was aware that Najib's release could potentially jeopardise his authority over UMNO. The enduring popularity of the "Bossku" movement within UMNO and the strong influence of Najib was substantiated by the recent party elections, in which his two sons were elected Vice Division Chief in Pekan, Pahang (Najib's home state) and Division Chief in Langkawi, Kedah, respectively.

To reinforce his position among the UMNO grassroots, Najib's continued incarceration and partial pardon were the best options for Zahid. The partial pardon will prevent Najib from running in the party election and general election in 2027. Najib would also be subjected to a five-year prohibition on holding political office and unable to seek re-election until August 2033.

This puts Zahid in a position of prominence in UMNO for the foreseeable future. Zahid

benefitted from his role as one who apparently tried to secure Najib's release while at the same time strengthening his own hold on UMNO.

### **DAP Avoids Rocking the Boat**

Anwar's efforts to counterbalance UMNO's influence may have inadvertently jeopardised certain relationships within his PH coalition, notably with the DAP. This was demonstrated when the government resorted to UMNO's old intimidation tactics when the police summoned Tony Pua, a former MP and senior DAP figure for questioning under the Sedition Act for his [satirical Facebook post](#) regarding the Pardons Board's decision to reduce Najib's sentence.

Nonetheless, everything seemed to be business as usual at the DAP leadership level with its Secretary-General, Anthony Loke, urging the [public to remain calm](#) and giving assurance that the decision by the Pardons Board would not impact DAP's relationship with UMNO in the coalition government. There was also no strong reaction to the intimidation of Tony Pua as well.

The DAP leadership's subdued response showcases its role as a "good" and "loyal" coalition partner in the unity government. There was concern that a strong statement by the DAP could have been used as a weapon by Najib's supporters within UMNO to create chaos and bring down the unity government. This demonstrates UMNO's hegemony and sway in the unity government, as the DAP has been compelled to soften its reformist position to avoid destabilising the unity government

### **A Missed Opportunity for Perikatan Nasional?**

Najib's sentence was halved under the watchful eyes of the unity government led by Anwar who would be recognised as the one that nearly got Najib released. Therefore, the opposition coalition under PN had an opportunity to capitalise on this situation, by reminding the public that the previous PN government led by former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, had refused to yield to UMNO's pressure in dismissing Najib's court cases.

The halving of Najib's sentence provided a golden opportunity for PN to re-establish itself as a credible alternative to PH. However, PN's response was neither strong nor firm, with relatively dull concerns raised by its Secretary General, [Hamzah Zainuddin](#), as well as a delayed response from its Chairman, [Muhyiddin Yassin](#).

PN's lukewarm reaction to the Pardons Board's decision could have been a strategic manoeuvre for the long term, as an all-out criticism of the decision would have closed the door over any potential collaboration between PN and Najib's faction within UMNO in the next general election.

It is worth noting that Hadi Awang of the Pan-Islamic Party (PAS), a PN component party, has maintained a significant close connection with Najib since 2015, with the latter an ally of sorts to PAS' long term objective of [hudud](#) and the [empowerment of the syariah courts](#) in the state of Kelantan. Hence, PAS' reticence could indicate that the organisation is considering capitalising on Najib's popularity in the future in order to advance the party's ambition. The relatively subdued reaction from PN could be

interpreted as an acknowledgment of UMNO's significance not only in the present unity government but also its importance in getting across the finishing line in forming a future government.

### **UMNO Still in the Driver's Seat?**

With regard to the present unity government, it is evident that UMNO maintains a significant influence, if not complete control, particularly in light of Najib's prison sentence reduction. Anwar's actions with the help of Zahid to placate the UMNO grassroots at the expense of PH's supporters, could prove detrimental in the next general election.

The DAP's subdued reaction to the Pardons Board's decision, coupled with its lack of urgency when one of its senior leaders was summoned for interrogation under the Sedition Act, shows an apprehension that decisive measures would infuriate UMNO, particularly Najib's faction within the party. Once formidable and resolute, today's DAP comes across as a party that is subservient to UMNO.

While Anwar and the DAP appear to be walking on a tightrope when it comes to UMNO, PN has also joined them with the realisation that UMNO remains a focal point should they ever need to establish a partnership, once more underscoring UMNO's critical role in facilitating the process of government formation.

Anwar, in attempting to become a successful coalition leader, could have damaged his reputation as a reformist prime minister that many had anticipated him to be. However, given the close relationship between Anwar and Zahid and the complex dynamics of Malaysian politics, anything is conceivable, and a continued partnership between PH and UMNO in the upcoming general election is a possibility that should not be ruled out.

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