

Curtain falls on 'frustrated' Najib as the right rejoice

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ANALYSIS As the curtain came down on this year's Umno general assembly, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak sounded like a frustrated man.

In his winding-up speech, the Umno president noted that the gathering this round had become distracted by the Sedition Act.

This was thanks to his deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin, who at the launch of the Umno wings' assemblies openly implored his boss to abandon any plans to abolish the colonial era law.

Najib eventually conceded at great expense to his international reputation, which he had worked tirelessly to build while on home soil he was roasted by detractors.

But the prime minister in his speech portrayed his about face to his 2012 promise as a responsible act, executed after "listening to the pulse of the people", to "safeguard" the nation's security.

Posturing aside, the hard truth of Najib's concession is that it marked his first major and possibly damaging defeat to the right wing elements in Umno.

Muhyiddin meanwhile declared in his winding-up speech that he was merely being a "good deputy" in urging Najib to keep the Sedition Act.

The atmosphere was unusual for a party like Umno, which is more accustomed to singing praises of its president in public while disagreements are often kept behind closed doors.

Despite Umno's right wing genes coming to the fore since BN's poor showing in the 2008 general election, the party had generally tolerated Najib's reformist agenda, albeit grudgingly.

But the party, which shifted further right after the last polls where Najib's grandiose plans failed to materialise into votes, its patience with the president appears to have reached a limit.

If Najib was able to get a few steps out of a stubborn bull by pulling it by its nose, the bull is now pulling back, with greater force.

Chinese: To woo or not

Despite Najib's usual jovial winding-up speech, sometimes peppered with inappropriate jokes and jibes, his frustration was evident.

He took great pains at addressing several Umno delegates who were insistent that BN should just abandon Chinese voters due to their continued refusal to back the ruling coalition.

"Use your brains," implored Najib who related how former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad was defeated in the 1969 polls after declaring he did not need Chinese votes.

Najib is mindful that non-Malay votes are crucial for BN's revival.

But Umno delegates, at least those aligned to the right-wing, see the quest to win Chinese votes as pointless and scripted their debates to perpetuate the siege mentality.

The aim was to instill fear in the Malays against DAP and the Chinese, who are painted as having an agenda to challenge Islam, the Malay special position and sow liberal ideas.

In the end Najib's usual clarion call for 1Malaysia made way to shouts of "1Melayu" unity in this general assembly.

The fear of defeat is in the air for Umno, and the smell is nauseating.

After 57 years in power, it is no longer a party but a political-conglomerate dynasty, where the baton has been passed from generation to generation of ruling elites. In their minds, losing power is inconceivable.

Playing to the gallery

And so delegates appeared more willing to cheer on Umno vice-president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who vowed to continue using the Sedition Act and hailed Muhyiddin for pushing for its preservation.

Even Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin, who had alternately donned the hat of a Malay nationalist and progressive over the last decade, opted to remind the Chinese community at the wing's meeting about the sacrifice of Malays in allowing the former to become citizens.

Wanita Umno chief Shahrizat Abdul Jalil too engaged in tough talk about the Sedition Act, but managed to slot in a reminder to delegates not to bash other races.

The tone gave a sense that Umno leaders are aware of the party's grassroots drifting farther right and do not wish to go against the tide.

Whether Najib's lieutenants have sensed the weakness in the premier's position remains to be seen, but the gulf between Najib and his party is possibly at its widest.

Najib is aware of elements out to undermine him and in his winding up speech again urged delegates to support the party leaders.

The premier had in recent months come under attack from Umno bloggers over his policies, which have also come under heavy criticism from his predecessor Mahathir.

"Our bloggers shoot us. In warfare, it is called friendly fire, but I tell you this friendly fire is not friendly," said Najib.

Though his decision to go back on his promise to abolish the Sedition Act has provided him with a lifeline for now, Umno is bruised and restless. The deafening roars heard throughout last week signal that it no longer wants a sheep to head an army of lions.

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