

Is Umno the 'last straw' for Najib?

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COMMENT Although Najib Abdul Razak, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, has all the right reasons to vacate his post given his involvement in the 1MDB financial scandal, chances are that he would not resign, at least for the time being.

Given the support or no opposition from the majority of Umno members, particularly at the levels of supreme council and division, Najib might cling on to the post of prime minister.

Despite the urgings for investigation and action against the culprits those involved in the financial scandal, Najib remains quite entrenched in his position with no signs of an early exit.

The support from some of his die-hard Umno ministers like Abdul Rahman Dahlan, the Urban Well-being, Housing and Local Government Minister, Shahidan Kassim, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, and Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the Home Affairs Minister, suggest that removing Najib is not an easy matter.

Even the former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, the ardent critic of Najib's involvement in the 1MDB scandal, seems powerless to remove him. He now thinks that Najib is after him and his friends, especially those in the media.

With the recent deployment of a counter-strategy to go after the 1MDB critics, Najib might even be emboldened to stay in power, at least until the next general election is called. There is a growing perception that despite the initial burst of criticisms against Najib for having received funds into his private bank accounts, the tide against him has somewhat subsided.

Ironically, the focus is on the whistleblowers, a very 'novel' feature of Malaysian politics and like in the past, there is a sense of déjà vu.

Whether Najib is removed or not depends on his support or lack of it in Umno.

Umno is invariably the biggest and strongest party, that commands fear and envy in the coalition of BN. It is Umno that calls the shots and other component parties merely and meekly follow the dictates of Umno. If Umno collapses, it goes with saying that other BN component parties made of non-Malay political parties would collapse like a pack of cards.

Key and strategic positions in the government are held by Umno leaders. Only less than important posts are dished out to non-Malay leaders. From the time of independence until today, Umno thinks that it is the only representative of the Malays. Malay support for PKR and PAS are seldom acknowledged as they constitute the opposition.

Removal of top leaders either in Umno or the government requires either overt or tacit

approval from Umno members, particularly at the levels of the supreme council, the highest decision-making body, and division.

Najib, as the head of Umno and prime minister of Malaysia, cannot be removed without the support from Umno members. The support of the members of the supreme council and division leaders is sine qua non for the removal of top government or party leaders. But unfortunately, removing a top leaders like the prime minister is not an easy as was witnessed during the days of Mahathir.

Material and non-material patronage

The relationship between the top leadership and members in Umno is based not on a straight-forward one, but that has been built on the basis of material and non-material patronage. It is the close network of patronage that defines the relationship between those in the top and those below.

Unless and until this bond is removed, it would be impossible for Umno members to be mobilised for the removal of the president of the party; in this case Najib. As long as top leaders are able to dish out goodies to those below, support for those in the top is assured.

It is not that Umno members love Najib to the point of blindly supporting him. For that matter many of them think that Najib is probably guilty of the crimes that he has been accused of. However, this realisation alone is not enough for them to push Najib out of power.

In many ways, some of them are also guilty of various misdeeds throughout their political career and that there is fear that if Najib bows out, they might have to do the same. So it is this sense of overall guilt or shame that prevents Umno members acting together to remove Najib.

If the RM2.6 billion went into the private accounts of Najib as alleged by The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) and that these funds were used by Najib to bankroll the last general elections, then one could imagine who the real beneficiaries of these fund were.

While Umno could have been the major recipient of these funds, let us also not forget how the non-Malay political parties in the BN were also the recipients. Wonder why MCA, Gerakan and MIC leaders are insisting that Najib is not guilty.

The practice of democracy in Umno is a sham.

Annual general assemblies and party elections are orchestrated to provide a semblance of unity. Most of the time, elections are only meant for contest among the rank-and-file members and elections of the second and third echelon leaders. Elections might fulfil some democratic criteria, but by themselves they don't tell us much about the practice of democracy in the party.

Thus, the lack of democratic space in the party and the absence of open and healthy debates make it impossible for the members to take some hard decisions or call for the removal of leaders who have been tainted with corruption and abuse of power.

With the blind support from Umno members, Najib might last in power until the next general elections. He might win the present battle against him; however, whether Umno and BN will win the next general election remains in doubt.

Mahathir is afraid that if Najib continues in his post, there is a high possibility that Umno and BN might lose the next general election. This is the reason why he wants Najib to make an exit so that UMNO can be saved.

Mahathir is afraid that if Umno goes down, there is a high possibility some Umno leaders might be charged, arrested and possibly imprisoned. He says that he wants to save Umno, but Umno itself is so corrupted and is beyond repair.

Whether Najib is removed or stays in power and whether Umno will back him is not as important as saving the country and its people from the predatory clutches of politicians and their cronies who are bent on enriching themselves and their families at the expense of the rakyat.

The 1MDB financial scandal is too big and monstrous to be left to the whims and fancies of Umno politicians or its members. Malaysians irrespective of race or religion have a stake in the system and so they have a responsibility to ensure that corrupt are brought to speedy justice for their traitorous activities.

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