

## **Najib's desperate shuffle for survival**

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COMMENT Najib Razak's cabinet reshuffle was an expected step in the repertoire of many measures that the prime minister has used to stay in office.

In this manoeuvre, he has removed the immediate leadership threats among the Umno hierarchy, closed down the two avenues of negotiation involving the 1MDB scandal, and purportedly strengthened the 'strongman' dimensions of his leadership.

Many argue this Mahathirian move has secured Najib's position by neutralising challengers. I disagree. In fact, Najib's measures of late reveal weakness - not strength - and are likely to deepen his leadership crisis.

With the reshuffle, Najib has forged new alliances among the various factions in Umno. In the Umno party elections of 2013, Najib made a strategic alliance with Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's appointees and the former premier's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin to secure dominance over internal party opposition seen from the Mahathir Mohamad camp.

Najib managed to position considerable loyalists as division chiefs in the party contests, but did not fully secure control over the Supreme Council or have a majority of division chief loyalists on his own, relying heavily on allies to shore up his position.

Najib's post-2013 approach to manage Umno was to fuel patronage to division chiefs, and to rely on a broad consensus cabinet that would include diverse representations from factions within the party. Among those included in cabinet were prominent Umno leaders not seen to be directly tied to Najib, current and former deputy prime ministers, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Muhyiddin Yassin respectively. Najib chose to keep his potential challengers close.

As the crisis with Najib's leadership of Umno evolved, with its roots in the 2013 party polls, Najib took steps ranging from meetings to promised contracts to stay in control. He followed in Mahathir's footsteps using the executive position to his advantage. His apparent aim was to neutralise threats to his power, to secure his position aka Mahathir-style as a long-term leader.

While he did not act decisively to put in his own loyalists, he was simultaneously unsettling the balance among Umno warlords and creating dissatisfaction among Umno elites, particularly with Mahathir. The dissatisfaction was fueled by displacement of actors in the Umno political economy, concerns that Najib sold out the party for himself and, most importantly, perceptions he was undermining the electoral position of Umno.

## **Four important shifts**

This was an insecure position, even before the recent scandals and revelations rocked his administration. The 1MDB corruption and embezzlement scandal reverberated strongly within some Umno circles because it represented the fears of many within the party.

The excessive amounts involved, the funding mechanism outside of the party and perceived to be concentrating on Najib rather than the party as a whole angered many within Umno, especially those against Najib's leadership. On top of that, the 1MDB scandal has seriously undermined Malaysia's credibility among investors, as it involves banks and deals across the region, and has had a negative impact on the economy as seen in the fall in value of the ringgit.

Two dominant views inside Umno have emerged. The Najib critics believe the premier should explain and account for the funds, and potentially leave his post. Others take the view that 1MDB may be the vehicle that can sink the entire Umno ship and thus, there is a need to rally around the leader. For all in Umno, the shared mode is political survival and protection of their positions, with differences in how this can be achieved.

Najib's cabinet reshuffle reveals four important shifts among Umno leaders in the past few weeks.

First, Zahid, previously seen to be more independent, has now allied with Najib. How strong and trustworthy this alliance is yet to be seen. In the short term, however, this alliance with the middle camp gives Najib more numbers among party divisions.

Second, Abdullah's loyalists have been strengthened in cabinet with the entry of people such as Reezal Merican Naina Merican and the consolidation of the position of Abdullah's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin.

Third, potential critics in position of prominence such as Nur Jazlan Mohamed, formerly from the Public Accounts Committee, have been brought into Najib's fold, with the aim of dividing the camp of potential Najib dissidents. A similar splitting dynamic has happened with the entrants from Sabah such as Salleh Said Keruak.

Finally, clear and open Umno critics, including a potential challenger to Najib, Muhyiddin Yassin (photo), have been purged from their leadership positions. Najib now seemingly has the majority of numbers at leadership levels, for now.

This move is being portrayed as savvy and effective - sweetened by the fact that the investigations over the 1MDB have been punted down the road.

## **Political ramifications**

Change is one of the consistencies in Malaysian politics. As Newton taught us, every action has a reaction. Najib's cabinet reshuffle will have political ramifications. By unsettling the

consensus cabinet post-2013, Najib has opened up a political Pandora's box for Umno.

The day of removing a DPM without political consequences in Malaysia has long gone. To do so without finesse will provoke sympathy for the former deputy among Umno's grassroots. Muhyiddin's public standing will also increase, and this will evoke further reactions to discredit him from Najib loyalists.

Differences in Umno over 1MDB have been confirmed with Muhyiddin's sacking and a leaked video of a private meeting between the former DPM and Mahathir's son Mukhriz and a few other party leaders. Divisions inside Umno are real. The louder the calls of 'one team' and 'unity,' the greater the discord and division.

The reality is that Najib dissidents are not going away, despite the steps to purge them. It is a matter of time before they react. One important question is where they will go. As the recent PAS history shows, purging opponents deepens splits within parties. This is especially the case if there is no place for those unhappy with the leadership within the party. Najib's action will push those unhappy in the party to potentially seek alternatives. Malaysia's Malay political landscape will continue to transform.

Najib also now faces the task of winning over his new allies in Umno. The cabinet reshuffle shows that loyalties are indeed fluid within the party. Infighting and jockeying for position and economic advantage remain alive and well.

The question of whether Najib can trust and work with his new appointees will be important. Will the use of patronage and position be enough to maintain their support? What will be the price of staying in power? Will it offset another challenger?

Some would argue that Najib's placement of the publicly unpopular Zahid is a measure to offset calls for his replacement. Yet, Zahid's elevation gives him a higher political platform for his own ambitions and to strengthen his own political base, and this will create its own uncertainties inside Umno and for Najib. Zahid comes to the deputy position with considerable grassroots support. The premier's fight for political security continues.

### **Rising public discontent**

While conditions inside Umno remain fractious, the situation outside of the party is even more unsettling for Najib. Malaysia's leader is still facing a legitimacy crisis with declining domestic support. Public views of the economy remain negative, especially over the new Goods and Services Tax (GST) and rising inflation.

Ironically, the cabinet reshuffle has created more doubts about Najib's leadership. The public is asking why he removed his critics and attempted to neutralise the investigations on 1MDB. Concerns are being raised about Najib's governance in the public at large as Najib's popularity is at a record low. Attention remains focused on fighting for political survival rather than governing for Malaysians.

Najib's choice of new deputy does not enhance the premier's ability to win back public support - at least not yet. While Zahid is highly popular in Umno, he does not have high standing outside the party, especially in the business community.

Not only is Zahid's public standing lower than that of Muhyiddin's, his leadership as home minister has not engendered public confidence. Zahid is seen to represent the hardline position of the party politically and economically, as an opponent to reform.

The message being sent is that Najib's leadership is moving further toward a hardline trajectory, a direction that is at odds with the majority of Malaysians. The hardliners have a misperception that the electorate is ignorant, forgetful, and forgiving, rather than aware, patient, and searching for leaders they can respect. History shows that crackdowns, arrests, and threats backfire, and are at best temporary measures that fail to address the underlying demands for a better Malaysia.

Meaningful public concerns that require public accountability have not been addressed. This failure to address the core issues involved in the 1MDB crisis and electoral vote-buying will only deepen Najib's leadership crisis. It will also spark greater public action, as the legal avenues to address the 1MDB investigation have been closed down.

Social movement Bersih 2.0 has already called for another public rally and other organisations have also asked for greater public accountability. The level of public outrage is increasing. With open calls for Najib's resignation and the contestations over the 1MDB scandal as well as Najib's leadership, the issue has moved outside of Umno circles into the society at large.

Najib's shuffle for survival was just that - a small easy move. In the face of consistent Umno party divisions, persistent insecurities, and rising public discontent, the larger forces challenging Najib's political legitimacy are very much affecting the country's political instability and will continue to do so.