

**40 years in politics, Najib reversing his father's legacy**  
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak celebrates his 63rd birthday today, a momentous occasion as it is also his 40th year in politics.

Najib started his political career when he was chosen to defend the Pekan parliamentary seat which was vacated by his father, then Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein after his untimely death in 1976.

He became an Umno Youth leader that year too, and from there he slowly climbed up the ranks before becoming prime minister and Umno president in 2009.

Political analyst Wong Chin Huat said Abdul Razak's legacy was that he successfully arrested Umno's decline by "transforming Malaysia's fragile multi-party democracy into an electoral one-party state".

But unlike his father, Najib's legacy in Umno however, may not be so admirable.

Ideas chief executive Wan Saiful Wan Jan said the prime minister came into power an indecisive but idealistic man, who promised to bring about a united "1Malaysia".

Riding on the popular groundswell, he abolished the Internal Security Act (ISA) and the Emergency Ordinance (EO), and vowed to get rid of the Sedition Act too, promising a new age where the government no longer professes to know all, but will listen to the people instead.

However Wan Saiful said, Najib's plans to make Malaysia progressive were foiled when he forgot that he had to bring his party along for the ride.

"Any leader who wants to change the country needs to change his own party first.

"I think Najib forgot that he needed to bring his party with him.

"He then realised that he failed to convince the Umno core supporters of the need to change their mindsets," said the Ideas chief executive, arguing that this hampered Najib's reform drive as he was unable to convince the leading BN party's supporters to follow his lead.

Instead of him leading and they following, Najib ended up having to follow what his underlings wanted.

The turning point came when despite his best efforts, Umno supporters were seen to have punished the prime minister for his attempt at reforms, giving the popular vote to the opposition in the 2013 national polls.

With his leadership on the rocks, the year after saw a dramatic shift in Najib's stance, especially at the Umno general assembly when he reneged on his promise to abolish the Sedition Act and instead announced plans to strengthen it as advocated by hardliners in the party.

Then as pressure grew from the 1MDB scandal, including from his then deputy Muhyiddin Yassin, Najib's hand was forced to execute a power move to show his strength.

He very quickly changed people's perception (that he was indecisive) by doing a very brutal cabinet reshuffle last year, as well as the changes that he made to the various institutions including the Attorney-General's Chambers," Wan Saiful said.

[Muhyiddin](#) (*photo*) was axed as deputy prime minister, and Abdul Gani Patail who was leading a probe into 1MDB was replaced with a new attorney-general, seen to be friendly to the government.

### **Survival at any cost**

It was survival at any cost, although as Wong posited, this wasn't new in Umno politics.

"Survival at all cost was built into the party by former presidents Abdul Razak and Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Najib just perfected its flaws," the Penang Institute fellow said.

And like it or not, Najib's strategy is paying off, and not even former premier Dr Mahathir has been able to mount a proper challenge against him.

The recent Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar by-elections, which the opposition billed as a referendum on Najib's leadership, saw BN win both seats with strong majorities, surpassing the 2013 general election results.

But Najib's newfound ruthlessness comes at a price, and his original goal to reform Malaysia and Umno may never be realised, at least not as long as he remain PM and party president.

"Looking at the current situation, it seems that to him, staying in power is very important.

"In order to remain in his current position he would have to follow Umno's trajectory rather than trying to steer it," Wan Saiful said.

For Wong, Najib's legacy in Umno will be a very dark one indeed.

"Najib will be remembered as the man who completely delegitimises Umno, (though) whether or not he would be the last Umno prime minister (remains to be seen)."

For the second time in Umno's history the party is again split in half, this time with former party stalwart Mahathir ironically leading the rebels.

It is perhaps almost tragic, and Wan Saiful said that Najib will ultimately be known as "the prime minister who wanted to reform but couldn't".