

## **Analysts: Umno's post-polls struggle may benefit Anwar**

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Rebellion is brewing within Umno after the party suffered major setbacks during the six state elections.

However, a potential change in leadership within Umno may benefit Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Political scientist Wong Chin Huat believes it was time for Anwar to forge stronger ties with Umno and BN instead of relying on Umno president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi individually.

He said Umno's 30 parliament seats keep the party an asset to the Anwar-led unity government, but Zahid himself had become a bullet magnet in elections.

"The first problem, PN rallies trained their guns on Zahid all the time, evoking the anger of the Malay middle ground and estranged Umno ground.

"It would be strategic for the prime minister to strengthen his government's ties

with Umno as an institution and not individual Umno leaders," he told Malaysiakini.

The six state polls on Saturday saw the Harapan-BN front suffering huge losses, albeit managing to retain their control of Selangor, Penang and Negeri Sembilan.

Both coalitions were wiped out in Terengganu, with BN failing to win any seats in Kedah.

It was the latest humiliating performance suffered by BN since the last November general election, which saw the country's oldest political coalition only securing 30 parliamentary seats out of 222.

### **Best interest**

Despite the dismal performance, BN became part of the federal administration after Zahid agreed to steer the coalition towards supporting Anwar and helped him get enough numbers to form a unity government.

Currently facing 87 criminal charges in court, including corruption involving his Akalbudi Foundation, Zahid was often used by Perikatan Nasional as a campaign material to paint Harapan-BN as corrupt.

Wong, who lectures at Sunway University, said Umno deputy president Mohamad Hasan (Tok Mat) may be the next best option for both Umno and Harapan's survival.

"If Umno can negotiate a deal for Tok Mat to replace Zahid, that would be best in the prime minister's interest," he added.

Sharing the sentiment was Khoo Ying Hooi of Universiti Malaya, who believes that having Zahid continue at Umno's helm would be detrimental to the party and Anwar.

She said this would eventually impact the Harapan-BN cooperation, especially in gearing up towards the next general election.

"Should Zahid continue to hold onto Umno, I think there will be a lot of pressure on Anwar from his Harapan allies, or they will show that impact with their partnership at the federal level.

"We can expect some struggle to keep this partnership and in the long run, they will be thinking about how to move forward with the general election," Khoo told Malaysiakini.

## **Fight tooth and nail**

This is not Zahid's first time under pressure to relinquish control over Umno.

The Bagan Datuk MP had faced internal pressure after the 15th General Election last November but managed to keep a tight grip on the party and even removed his rivals.

However, such sentiments were revived after Saturday's electoral drubbing.

They include party youth chief Dr Akmal Saleh, who on Sunday warned Umno they should change or risk losing its relevance.

Many political observers expect Zahid to refuse to bow down to the renewed calls for his resignation and fight tooth and nail against any attempt to challenge his position.

Khoo said Zahid will be motivated to stay at the helm due to his corruption cases.

"The infighting within Umno is real and Zahid is not entirely strong in his position as well.

"But that corruption case will make him do whatever he can," he said.

## **Challenging Zahid**

Analyst Oh Ei Sun shared similar views.

"Umno is a party with many factions at any one time, and of course, some factions, including those loosely affiliated with Hisham (former Umno vice-president Hishammuddin Hussein) and so on, would find any excuse to challenge Zahid.

"But ultimately I think Zahid still commands a lot of grassroots support in Umno," he said.

Oh, a Singapore Institute of International Affairs senior fellow, also believes that Zahid's deputy Mohamad does not dare to move against the party president anytime soon due to the latter's grip on Umno.

"It's not that easy to topple Zahid. And Tok Mat, being a rather cautious figure, I don't think he would do so. At least not at this point," he added.

Meanwhile, both Oh and Awang Azman Awang Pawi, another Universiti Malaya academician, said Zahid should not be made to shoulder all the blame for the state polls results.

According to Awang Azman, Umno has to take its dismal performance as a collective responsibility instead.

Pointing out to the drubbing Umno sustained in PN-controlled states such as Kelantan and Terengganu and the victories it recorded in Negeri Sembilan, he said the election campaign involved efforts from top to bottom.

"The leaders at branch division levels, including their youth, Puteri and Wanita Umno chiefs are responsible too, whether they win or lose.

"So, this has to be viewed from a thorough mechanism perspective," Awang Azman said.

### **Rejecting Madani**

For Oh, the huge electoral setback was also linked to the mainstream Malay population rejecting Anwar's Madani idea.

This group, he said, was more comfortable with PN and particularly PAS for their more conservative ideology while the Anwar-led unity front had been skirting the issue by emphasising more on their social and economic concerns.

"The results more than anything else demonstrated the majority of Malays or the

Malay mainstream, preferring a more conservative religiously oriented social-political outlook in the country. PAS panders to that and they win many seats.

"Anwar and his unity government tried to skirt this issue by emphasising social and economic concerns and so on with their policies.

"So, it is the whole idea of Madani which is not appealing to the majority or mainstream Malay population," he said.

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