

Najib's ascendency will see return of Dr Mahathir
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Barring a last-minute surprise, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will soon be announcing that he will not be contesting the position of Umno president, paving the way for his deputy, Najib Abdul Razak, to take over sooner than originally anticipated.

The writing is already on the wall for Abdullah, if leaked reports of the negative reaction among the Umno supreme council in a recent meeting are indicative. The question is no longer how he will exit the stage – he will go out with a whimper – but rather how a Najib administration would look like.

We expect it to be more decisive as well as more repressive, what with Dr Mahathir Mohamad's guiding hand featuring prominently, either explicitly or in the background.

mahathir open house 051008 shaking handMahathir has already indicated that he would want to play some role in a Najib administration, probably in an advisory capacity. Najib, given his more deferential attitude towards Mahathir, would probably accede to this request.

It would be more helpful for Najib to have Mahathir within the corridors of power rather than taking potshots at him from outside, as Abdullah's experience has shown. While it remains to be seen how much Najib will listen to Mahathir, we very much believe that at the very least, his political philosophy will play a dominant role in a Najib administration.

It's no secret that Mahathir's worldview of a strong Barisan Nasional and a strong Malaysia starts from having a strong Umno in charge. One of his key pieces of advice to Najib will be to reassert Umno's position within the BN as well as in the country. It is hard to imagine opposition parties and representatives and even NGO leaders having the same kind of political space to protest and to organise under such a scenario.

ISA arrests will not stop at just three

We expect that the political space would be reduced dramatically under a Najib administration, if Mahathir has any say in these matters. So far, Abdullah has vacillated between playing hardball and softball, yet another example of his indecisive leadership.

A strong Umno necessitates that it project its force and power decisively and there is no other tried and tested method than the repressive laws within its arsenal. ISA arrests will not stop at just three. At any sign of major political unrest or protest, expect there to be a decisive reaction from a Najib administration. Perhaps a repeat of Operasi Lalang.

Why would Najib want to risk further alienating the electorate by taking a harsher, more authoritarian approach?

najib finance ministry pc 220908 02He has arguably two options when he takes over as the next prime minister, assuming that opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim does not succeed in forming the next government first. He can take the reform road, which is to implement the reforms which Abdullah promised but did not deliver. Or he can take the repressive road, which is to reassert Umno's dominance in the political arena, presumably Mahathir's

preferred option.

Najib has even less credibility than Abdullah in terms of institutional reform. It is likely that even if he promises some of these reforms, the public would be skeptical and rightly so after almost five years of unfulfilled promises.

Given Zaid Ibrahim's experience under a supposedly more liberal prime minister, we find it hard to believe the notion that Umno can fundamentally reform itself or the federal government which it is in charge of, especially under a Najib administration. Any talk of reform in any substantive way would inevitably meet a certain and obvious death.

abdullah badawi pc penang 160908 That leaves the option of playing hardball, a game with Mahathir excels in, as his maneuverings against Abdullah have shown. The underlying assumption here is that by projecting Umno's strength, the party unity that has been wavering within Umno can be re-established. And a strong Umno would be in a better position to unite an increasingly divided BN.

This is the Mahathir worldview: Arrest your political opponents under the ISA if you have to but do that to buy the time needed to reunite Umno and the BN, get the economy back on its feet and get the country back on track in terms of governing. If this invites international opprobrium, so be it. Hunker down and you will reap the rewards in due time.

This is more or less the playbook Mahathir followed in the aftermath of the economic and political crisis after 1998 and in a way, his political instincts were proven right. He brought back political and economic stability to the country and he managed to survive the massive international criticism following what he did to Anwar.

Expect a dominant and assertive Umno

Often, we find the strangest of political bedfellows during times of political uncertainty. Mahathir had to resort to blogging when the mainstream media wouldn't give him the coverage he was accustomed to when he was the PM. He courted some of the uber bloggers during his time of exile including Jeff Ooi and Rocky Bru.

mahathir chedet blog website event 180908 03 He spoke some of the language of openness and democracy. But make no bones about it, Mahathir is ultimately a political animal driven by what he still thinks is best for the country and this will and always has been a dominant and assertive Umno within a dominant and assertive BN.

We saw glimpses of this when he was not afraid to play the race card in the aftermath of the March general elections by speculating that the Malays are in danger of losing their rights to the non-Malays and by accusing Abdullah of allowing the Singapore government to be neo-colonists in Johor under the aegis of the Iskandar Development Region (IDR).

If he serves as an advisor to a Najib cabinet, formally or informally, we are quite sure that given the opportunity, he would resort to the tried and tested methods of asserting Umno's dominance which is to repress the opposition and civil society, consequences be damned.