

Direct BN membership 'a political gimmick'
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Politicians and civil rights activists have described the proposal to open up Barisan Nasional (BN) to individual membership as a political ploy designed to shore up the ruling coalition's battered image.

Those interviewed said the idea, mooted by premier and BN chairperson Abdullah Ahmad Badawi over the weekend, will not work because component parties are based on race-based politics. Differences have surfaced over Umno's hegemony, especially over the past year.

Malaysian Voters Union coordinator BK Ong said component parties, especially Umno, would not welcome the move out of fear that it will no longer be able to exert control on outspoken and courageous individuals.

Suggesting that component parties would prefer to enroll members, he also said individual members will not be able to do much. As an example, he cited former de facto law minister Zaid Ibrahim, who had quit his cabinet post in protest of the recent use of the Internal Security Act.

"It's just a political stunt revived in a time of internal crisis," said Ong, recalling that current Gerakan president Koh Tsu Koon (left) had made the same proposal 20 years ago.

"The only way forward for BN is to resolve racism and integrate (the component parties) into a single non-racial Malaysian party."

Pokok Sena Umno division secretary Ramli Mohd Yunus said the Putrajaya-based administration must first prove to Malaysians that it is a clean, transparent, efficient and trustworthy.

He also rejected a suggestion to create a BN Club for individuals, saying this is not the right way to rejuvenate Umno or BN.

Ramli said the BN has to prove that it has the political conviction to uphold the Federal Constitution, rule of law and independence of judiciary.

"Individual membership is the wrong medicine for the disease," he said.

Former Bagan Jermal assemblyperson and MCA division vice-chairperson Ooi Chuan Aik does not believe individuals will join BN or that they will help the coalition to reform even if they become members.

He suggested that component parties should put their house in order before talking about reform and rebranding, and that leaders, particularly from Umno, must change their attitude to face political realities today.

He noted that, until now, the Umno-led government has yet to rectify poor governance, bad financial management and arrogance.

"(These were the) mother of all issues during the last general election campaign (in March). How will people join as individual members when they are so unhappy with BN?" he asked.

Gerakan central committee member Wong Mun Hoe was the only one who felt that Abdullah's proposal is a step forward that may eventually integrate the coalition into a single political entity catering to the needs of Malaysians.

Pointing out that it is encouraging to hear the concept of multi-racial membership from a top Umno leader, Wong said this was a response to growing desire among many Malaysians to see a two-tier multi-racial political system flourishing.

Views from the opposition

PAS Parit Buntar MP Mujahid Yusof Rawa said it is difficult to envisage how BN will introduce individual membership, since this is alien to the coalition's reliance on race-based politics.

BN, he said, is a grouping of ethnic interests that meets at supreme council meetings, and the coalition has never been a single political entity with a specific concept.

"Individual membership could upset its divide-and-rule policy and uproot its racist ideals," he said, suggesting that Abdullah could have been "kidding" since he has nothing to lose by coming up with the proposal.

"His successor would face tough opposition from Umno itself in implementing the new concept."

PKR legal advisor CV Prabhakaran said he doubts that individual members can bring any benefit or change to the coalition, given the prevalence of self-interest in the current set-up.

"Can an individual member override or disagree with a decision made by the dominant Umno?"

This (proposal is) merely a toothless tiger to hoodwink the people," he said.

DAP's Bukit Bendera parliamentarian Liew Chin Tong said the proposal does not carry sufficient weight since it has come from the out-going Umno head - it should have been made by a leader who has a strong mandate.

He expressed disappointment with Information Minister Ahmad Shaberry Chik who had immediately shot down the proposal in order to protect Umno's standing.

"The problem is Umno cannot tolerate different opinions and dissent," he said.

Perak DAP legislator A Sivanesan said the proposal could be another move to "deceive the electorate" and a political speech "to regain lost ground".

"If the BN is sincere, it should long ago have set up a national authority to resolve contentious racial and religious issues," he added.