

Kuala Terengganu: It's all about Najib
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Manjit Bhatia | Jan 12, 09

Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak says the Kuala Terengganu by-election isn't about him but about Umno. Najib's assessment is a barefaced lie.

He's deputy prime minister, and the deputy president of Umno. He has managed to secure Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's ignominious exit from national politics. Najib will take the helm in two months.

The former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad will be gleeful. After falling out with his protégé Anwar Ibrahim in 1997, and then Abdullah, whom he had personally anointed as his successor in 2003 before his retirement, Najib has been Mahathir's pet.

Najib has been the one Mahathir privately wishes as his heir, if only he could have found a way of hurdling Najib over Abdullah in 2002-03.

Mahathir's claim that Wan Ahmad Farid, who promptly resigned as senator and deputy minister, is Abdullah's stooge, is incredibly stupid. Najib is Mahathir's patsy too.

After Anwar was humiliatingly ousted from public office, Mahathir began to groom Najib to become the country's top dog. But almost immediately factional divisions within Umno deepened and widened.

Former law minister Zaid Ibrahim argues that Abdullah gave Umno, which dominates the ruling multi-racial Barisan Nasional coalition, its best-ever result in the 2004 elections on the back of his then manifesto for change.

But die-hard ultra-nationalists loyal to Mahathir spoiled Abdullah's party. They rolled back his agenda, and saved many of Mahathir's privatisation projects that would benefit his cronies in Umno and their Chinese and Indian backers.

Abdullah a weak leader

Zaid is right: Abdullah has been a weak leader. In fact, the combination of Mahathir's cretins, Mahathir's own woolly and sour grapes sniping from the sidelines, and Abdullah's own loud-mouthed son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, have weakened Abdullah politically.

Abdullah was always the least likely of Umno's leaders to succeed Mahathir. Still, when Abdullah tried to bury Mahathir's crony-infested corrupt legacy, Mahathir cried foul.

As a long-time Mahathir loyalist, Abdullah was also party to the Mahathir-led cronyism that marked the Umno and BN regime. Najib, too. Malaysia's ethnic parties always deemed power as unto themselves.

mahathir mohamad 01 Mahathir has often condemned Malays for possessing a Third World mentality for constantly seeking the state to spoon-feed their livelihood. Not once did Mahathir ever back away from doing so. For 22 years, the Mahathir administration exhibited a typically Third World regime with a typically Third World mentality, exemplified by its leader.

Whether Najib wins or loses the Kuala Terengganu by-election, he will become Umno president and therefore prime minister. This by-election is about Umno and about Najib.

The non-Malay parties are too gutless to directly challenge Umno hegemony. They think political bargaining is the best way to derive a political balance between the different races that is also equitable. They won't negotiate differently with Najib.

Since independence in 1957, however, these political negotiations have also settled only one thing: How to carve the spoils of government amongst their respective cronies within the parties, nepotism amongst relatives of politicians, and business cronies with direct lines to political patronage.

Najib a desperate man

Najib will, in all likelihood, rule Umno, BN and Malaysia in the same way Mahathir did. This by-election is about Najib and the prospect of his "rulership" of the country and its body politics that won't change.

Najib will rule by setting one race upon the other, not on the basis of fair economic or political competition but on the basis of race itself, for the sake of maintaining power through racial divisions.

Najib is a desperate man. He is also the least popular of Umno politicians in a stable of suspect potential leaders, such as Muhammad Taib.

muhammad taib In 1997, Muhammad waltzed in and out of Australia with RM3.8 million in cash in his luggage despite being charged with foreign exchange and immigration irregularities.

Mahathir forced Muhammad to resign as Selangor premier. Today he's a federal minister. No doubt he harbours ambitions of becoming prime minister. In Malaysia infamy paves paths to politically prosperous careers.

Win or lose the Kuala Terengganu by-election, Najib will be prime minister next March after the Umno general assembly, regardless of the ghost of the murdered Mongolian model, Altantuya Shaariibuu, continuing to haunt Najib as it does his confidante Abdul Razak Baginda, who was acquitted by Malaysia's laughable judiciary over her death.

The Malay vote in Kuala Terengganu will be split, but it's the non-Malay vote that'll be more interesting. Historically the non-Malays have voted BN. That's a vote for Najib. If the trend

continues, it'll be regressive for Malaysia.

MANJIT BHATIA, an academician and writer, is also research director of AsiaRisk, a political, economic and risk analysis consultancy in Australia. He specialises in international economics and politics, with a focus on the Asia-Pacific.

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