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Umno gears up for polls with reshuffle

Almost recovered from the 2008 electoral setbacks, Umno hits the ground running in the new year as it gears up for the 13th general election, writes **ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR**

DATUK Seri Ahmad Said wore a broad smile as he greeted well-wishers waiting for his arrival at Kuala Terengganu's Sultan Mahmud Airport on New Year's Day, the day he officially took the helm of Terengganu Umno.

After a quick scan for familiar faces, the 53-year-old menteri besar gave a short speech thanking Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak for having confidence in him to lead the state Umno, a post temporarily entrusted to party vice-president Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein in April last year to consolidate the rival factions.

Ahmad had taken the morning flight from Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, returning from a short holiday abroad with his family. He was in Britain when Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor announced his appointment a few days earlier.

Ahmad's appointment has been viewed by some national party leaders as recognition of his leadership skills. Empowering him politically, they said, would give him more clout to push through reforms that would ensure Terengganu remain under Barisan Nasional in the next general election. The state fell to Pas in 1999 but was wrested back by BN in 2004. Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh was subsequently made menteri besar.

Ahmad was not Umno's choice for menteri besar after the 2008 general election. It was known that he survived several internal sabotage attempts, including by elected representatives closely associated with the former menteri besar, whose candidacy was rejected by the palace.

Amid criticism and resentment, Ahmad made his mark through promoting people-centric programmes.

"His first task obviously is to rope in people with fresh ideas and, most importantly, people who can and will work with him," said an Ahmad aide.

As Idris, who is Jertih assemblyman and also Besut Umno chief, appeared to be receptive to Ahmad's reappointment, it is expected that Ahmad will be magnanimous



Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, have been working to prepare the party for the next general election.

in dealing with politicians seen as opposing his leadership.

Idris, now the chairman of Mara, said: "Many are of the opinion that Terengganu Umno is at the end of its road. We prefer to view these appointments as testimony that it has, in fact, become stronger."

Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim has also taken a conciliatory tone on his appointment as the new No. 2 in Perlis Umno.

Like Idris, Shahidan, who led Perlis Umno when he was menteri besar from 1995 to 2008, was not reappointed to head the state after the 2008 general election. He was replaced by Datuk Seri Dr Md Isa Sabu, now state Umno chief.

"I am willing to work with the menteri besar," said Shahidan, a two-term Arau member of parliament until his appointment as menteri besar.

Abdul Shukor Sultan, from Perlis's Padang Besar division, said consolidation was the only option for Perlis Umno if the opposing sides were serious about checking Pas support.

As party president, Najib made changes in several state Umno as part of a housekeeping exercise to speed up Umno's recovery in time for the next general election. As head of the 13-member ruling coalition, Najib wants to see his own party take the lead in defending Putrajaya.

Najib also released two other party vice-presidents — Datuk Seri Mohd Shafie Apdal in Kedah and Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi in Penang. Shafie was replaced by his former deputy, Datuk Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah, and Ahmad Zahid by supreme council member and Nibong Tebal division chief Datuk Zainal Abidin Osman.

Shafie had been juggling the duties of federal minister, Umno vice-president, MP of Semporna and Semporna division chief. Ahmad Bashah, no doubt is a better bet, having had experience as a state executive councillor under four Kedah menteris besar.

In Penang, the Zainal Abidin-Datuk Musa Sheikh Fadzir combination could help some Umno divisions recover from inertia.

All three vice-presidents now return to focus on their party duties. Hishammuddin (chairman of the code of ethics and constitutional amendment committee), Ahmad Zahid (training bureau and membership recruitment) and Shafie (voter registration bureau) oversee important areas as Umno prepares to face the voters again.

Najib and his deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, however, remain as Selangor and Federal Territory liaison chiefs, re-

spectively.

The prime minister had made clear his wish to see Selangor back in BN's fold. Analysts viewed BN's ability to retain Hulu Selangor in last April's by-election as a morale booster, but cautioned that Umno had a lot more to do to prevent the marginal seats from changing hands.

Selangor Pas information chief Roslan Mohd Shahir had claimed that the party could win state seats that it lost to Umno in 2008, namely Sungai Tawar, Sabak, Taman Templer, Sri Serdang, Morib and Paya Jaras.

Selangor is likely to be a big battleground in the next national polls. The political forces have been working feverishly in the state since 2008, with BN aiming to regain control and Pakatan Rakyat struggling to stay in power.

Umno has entered the new year in election mode. All levels in the party have been told to work "as though the general election is just around the corner", after Najib made what was widely seen as a clarion call for the party to prepare for the 13th general election at the Umno general assembly last October.

"We are already in top gear at party headquarters. The same message has been passed down to the state, divisional and branch levels," a party official said.

Najib will embark on a nationwide tour; his programme should be ready after Muhyiddin chairs the Umno management committee in the middle of the month. This will complement the party's Juara Rakyat programme, which party information chief Datuk Ahmad Maslan said would from now include those of authority addressing current issues.

As the Umno leadership pushes for the party's revival, Umno's 3.4 million members have to embrace the values their party president cited in his speech at the general assembly — which are to put the party first, raise team spirit, become people-centric, inclusive and new media savvy, disavow political sabotage and woo young voters.

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