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Najib does it his way to revive Umno

When Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak presides over his party's 65th anniversary gathering today, he can revel in the fact that he has put Umno back on the road to recovery.

EVEN Lady Gaga would not have got the sort of reception that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad enjoyed when he arrived as the VVIP guest of the Cheras Umno division meeting on Sunday.

Just the mere mention of the former premier's name in division chief Datuk Syed Ali Alhabshie's welcoming speech drew a standing ovation. In fact, Dr Mahathir received a total of three standing ovations that morning.

"He made our day, I still get goose bumps thinking about it," said division secretary Zuraidah Musa.

It was a far cry from just a few years ago when Dr Mahathir could not even secure a place as a delegate in his Kubang Pasu division.

Umno has had a number of significant moments since the political tsunami and Dr Mahathir's return to and support for the party is one of them.

There was a lot of nonsense initially that Umno was reverting to Mahathirism but it is clear by now that the distance that Umno has come since March 2008 has been the result of its president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

As the party marks its 65th anniversary today, the consensus in the party is that Najib has shown that he deserves to be where he is today. It has been a rocky road, full of challenges from the political to the economic, but he has shown that he has got what it takes for the rigorous demands of the top job.

Najib has brought about a renewed sense of confidence in the party. He has worked hard to restore the party's morale and fighting spirit and more important especially in the context of Umno, he has put to rest niggling doubts among party members that Umno had lost its Malayness and that its Malay agenda has been hijacked by his detractors and groups like Perkasa.

Umno members have been concerned, even angry, about the way their identity, position and religion have been challenged in the aftermath of the political tsunami and they needed reaffirmation that their party would continue to articulate and champion Malay interests.

The more progressive segment of Umno is adapting to the new political landscape. But Najib is still struggling to convince the more radical elements in his party to come to grips with the new social and political reality - that to succeed in the next general election, Umno has to be moderate, fair and inclusive of other Malaysians.

He is telling them that beating the Malay drum has no meaning if Umno loses power and to be in power, it also needs the support of the other races.

In that sense, Najib is looking beyond the mountain top even if many in his party are not looking any further than the next general election.

Some Umno members would still remember the anniversary immediately after March 2008. It was so poorly attended that TV cameras were asked not to pan to the empty seats.

Party morale was at rock bottom and despite Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's claim that "Umno will be around for as long as the Malay



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race exists," many in the audience felt that the party was near the end of the road. A Malay journalist at the event thought that it was one of the most depressing Umno gatherings he had ever seen.

Now, three years later, Umno is about to reclaim the Malay ground that it had lost to PAS and PKR.

The prevailing sentiment in the party is that if Najib called for elections now, the Barisan would be returned to power with a two-thirds majority, riding primarily on the strength of Umno.

They have done their math and they know that based on the estimated 5% Malay vote swing back to Umno, they stand a good chance of doing well in the next polls.

But the real test that Umno is a party of the future will come when it holds its first truly grassroots party election next year. It is a new system aimed at empowering the grassroots and battling money politics.

Umno is at its most stable in years. Najib and his No 2 Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is six years older than him, are a compatible team. Both are sober men who rose through the ranks and are not prone to sensationalism or controversy. They have years of political and administrative experience behind them.

Najib is very much in control of Umno. His track record in steering the party back from the brink is something which no one else in the party can rival.

A great deal of Umno's clout among the Malays also has to do with Najib's performance as Prime Minister so far. He has done a credible job and has been able to focus on his duties in spite of the attacks and sniping by the strongest opposition that the Barisan has ever faced.

In short, Najib has provided leadership at a time when Umno most needed it. Umno's 65th anniversary gathering may not be its most glorious in history but it will definitely be its most hopeful and optimistic in the last few years.

And Dr Mahathir, who rejoined Umno a day after Najib became Prime Minister, will also be there to show his support.