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Insight by JOCELINE TAN

# Najib's fate rests with party

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's chief concern after the general election was forming a government without Chinese representation but his continued political survival will depend on whether Umno stands by him in the party polls.

**D**ATUK Seri Najib Tun Razak spent a lot of time alone in his office for several days after the general election.

The Prime Minister probably needed some alone time in order to absorb the outcome of the polls. Barisan Nasional retained the government by a comfortable majority but he had badly wanted to do better.

His aides said his main concern was about having to form a government without Chinese representatives and he had to explore various scenarios. His component parties MCA and Gerakan had failed to deliver and had done the right thing by declining to take up any government posts.

In fact, just hours after the election results were known, MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek had informed Najib that the party was sticking to its stand not to accept government posts because the MCA losses were worse than in 2008.

There is no denying that Najib feels deeply let down by the results, especially by the way the Chinese voters snubbed all the overtures he had made to them.

"In Selangor, only about 10% of the Chinese voted Barisan. Just imagine how he feels - every 10 Chinese he meets, he knows only one supported him. He gave his all but it was as though all his policies and his efforts did not matter. They still wanted to punish Umno," said Rita Sim, co-founder of the CENSE think-tank.

The Barisan side is not the only one that is still coming to terms with the election results.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim seems even more unhappy because it looks like his dream of becoming Prime Minister will remain a dream. He has rejected the election outcome and as one foreign diplomat put it, it is like a football player, after losing a game, insisting that it should have been played according to the rules of a rugby game.

But even without the Chinese support, Najib's 133-seat victory was 54 seats more than the opposition's 79-seat tally. It was however still short of the 138 seats his predecessor had won and that has wounded him.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad put it more bluntly - he said it was Barisan's "worst election results". Dr Mahathir knows what it is like to be the target of a Chinese rebellion because he tasted it in the 1986 general election. But what he went through was nothing like what happened on May 5.

The elderly statesman had been the political catalyst in determining the fate of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and he knew everyone was watching what he had to say about the election results.

A couple of days after the polls, he said quite ominously that Umno would decide if Najib goes or stays. Then he went overseas and his next big statement was made in Japan where he was attending a conference. He said Umno will continue to support Najib because of a lack of



**Survival game:** Najib survived the general election without the Chinese support but he now has to get the Malay support to survive in Umno. Muhyiddin (left) has indicated that he is standing by Najib.



**Dr Mahathir:** 'No alternative to Najib's leadership'.

an alternative.

Dr Mahathir is not the sort to give wholesale compliments or endorsements to anyone and this was as good as saying that Najib will survive.

But Najib is still not out of the danger zone, especially with the Umno election taking place in November. His supporters have argued that Umno won more seats than in 2008 and that the 88 Umno candidates who won exceeded the sum total of Pakatan Rakyat seats.

"Umno needs to be strengthened and to widen its base. Let's not kid ourselves by saying that Umno is stronger now just because our party won more seats than in 2008. Terengganu almost fell," said Kuala Terengganu politician Datuk Wan Albakri Mohd Noor, referring to Barisan's narrow three-seat majority in the state.

The rumblings on the Umno ground basically revolve around the argument that just as Pak Lah had taken responsibility for the 2008 political tsunami, Najib has to take the blame for May 5.

However, former Penang Umno strongman Datuk Seri Dr Ibrahim Saad said Najib also has a few things going in his favour. His deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, 66, is seven years older than him. More important, Muhyiddin has clearly stated that he is standing by Najib.

Muhyiddin's chief concern is the future of Umno and he is not interested in causing a leadership crisis that will split the party. Otherwise, as one blogger put it, the party will be destroyed and there will only be tables and chairs left in Umno's PWTC headquarters at the next general election.

The other important point to note is that the three Umno vice-presidents are with Najib.

Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the top VP and also the most charismatic of the three, would have been the man that the party could have rallied behind. But he is a Najib loyalist and he came out early to voice his loyalty to Najib.

Umno insiders said that back in the 2009 party elections, Dr Ahmad Zahid was asked by the Pak Lah camp to go for the deputy presidency. After he announced his intention, Najib called him up for a four-eyed meeting. Shortly after, he phoned an aide of Pak Lah to say, "Sorry, I cannot do it. Najib just spoke to me."

"Najib will survive the Umno election. I won't be surprised if there is more than one nomination for the president post but none will pose a real threat," said Kok Lanas assemblyman Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad.

Various Umno leaders have been issuing statements the last few days asking for a no-contest for the posts of party president and deputy president to prevent a split.

In another instance, supporters of another leader went further and claimed that Najib had endorsed

that particular leader and does not want anyone to challenge her.

On the contrary, Najib has announced that all posts are open to challenge and that Umno will respect the process of democracy.

At the recent supreme council meeting, a member had proposed that the two top positions not be challenged. Those around the table began tapping on the table to show their approval but Najib chose not to respond.

The new Umno electoral system, which will see some 140,000 delegates deciding on the new Umno leadership line-up, is meant to be more democratic and inclusive and the calls for the top two to win uncontested have irritated many ordinary Umno members.

It is quite pointless telling people that certain posts should not be contested because under the reformed system, anyone vying for a post only needs a single nomination to qualify.

Most of them admit that there is no one out there who can really take on Najib or Muhyiddin at this point in time but they want to reserve the right to decide rather than be told what to do.

Publisher Datuk A. Kadir Jasin spoke for many of them when he blogged that Barisan in the peninsula was saved by Umno members who supported the coalition even though they disagreed with the overwhelming gestures that Najib had been making to the Chinese. He said it is only right that ordinary Umno members have the freedom to decide on the leadership line-up including the top posts.

Kadir pointed out that Najib is in a vulnerable position and much will also depend on how he and his team manages the run-up to the Umno polls.

For a start, the party's election post-mortem this time is being

done in a more discreet manner. In 2008, a team of Umno supreme council members had gone from state to state to get feedback from the rank and file. Sparks flew and the air was filled with acrimony and frustration.

It was what the Malays call "lepaskan geram" (eruption of pent-up feelings), especially on the part of those who were not picked as candidates and who lost. There was actually quite little objective feedback and in hindsight, it was the fiery discourse at these sessions that marked the beginning of the end for poor Pak Lah.

This time around, the exercise is more contained and low key. According to Muhyiddin, an independent panel is doing a comprehensive analysis on it. The deputy president is a seasoned player and he does not intend to let things get out of hand.

In the meantime, the conservatives in Umno want the leadership to stop bending backwards for the Chinese.

Their message to Najib is that he has to get real. They think the Chinese vote is not going to come back to Barisan even in the next election. They want Najib to stop romancing the Chinese or he will lose the Malay vote in the next round.

"Umno will not push him out but we want him to listen and to rectify things," said Fadzil Shuib who is from the Tanjung division in Penang.

Najib's government, said a young Umno official, has to serve all Malaysians but as the Umno president, he has to address and appease his core supporters who want to see him make a grand gesture to the Malays.

In the meantime, the Umno blame game is still going strong. Those who lost in the election will likely be challenged as division chiefs.

In Penang, there is a lot of noise for state Umno chief Datuk Seri Zainal Abidin Othman to step down. They are blaming Zainal, who lost to Datuk Mansor Othman in Nibong Tebal, for the last-minute switch of candidates that cost them seats. They complained he is not easily accessible and some are even blaming his young and beautiful wife for distracting him from his political duties.

Zainal, in his 50s, had married a woman in her 20s last year and during the wedding, the couple drove through the kampung in their open-top car waving to everyone. If he had won, this would not have been an issue but he lost and his personal life is being dredged up.

In Terengganu, there were complaints that while PAS candidates were mostly graduates, one of the Umno candidates reportedly only had a Standard Three qualification.

Unsettling times lie ahead for Umno as it prepares to elect its leaders while grappling with the landscape shift.

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