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Najib: Back from the brink?

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> Has the beleaguered PM and Umno president turned the tide, and fortified his position in time for the general assembly?

ASHRAF SHAMSUL/THE SUN

COMMENT

by Baradan Kuppusamy

ONE of the biggest events on the country's political calendar starts on Tuesday when the five-day Umno general assembly kicks off.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak will take centre stage to more than 5,000 delegates and observers as head of the largest political party in the country.

Is he weakened by criticisms and calls to step down or has he actually strengthened his position?

For nearly a year, the iMDB cotitroyersy and RM2.6 billion cash in his personal accounts have weighed down heavily on his person, his Umno party and the government.

But political analysts believe he will not only survive, but also consolidate his position.

"He has definitely strengthened himself already," said Dr Oh Ei Sun, senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

"The power of incumbency is so

great that critics from all sides and of all controversial issues are simply powerless in terms of toppling him," he told *theSun*

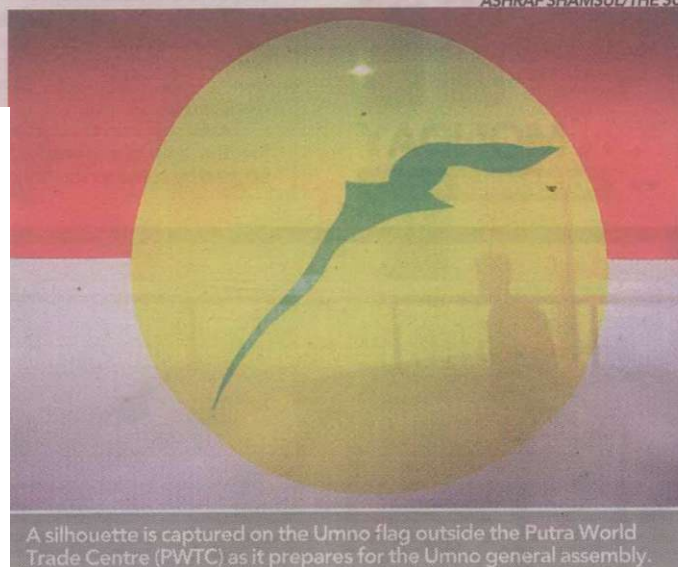
"The forgiving and forgetful nature of the Malaysian electorate also dictates that all these issues will have little impact in the long run," he said.

Najib's main critic in Umno - deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin - in his own words, has been reduced to a "tree stump".

In a departure from convention, Umno has decided, for the coming convention, to allow the respective heads of the wings - Youth, Wanita and iPuteri - to open their respective assemblies, a job previously reserved for the deputy president.

Whether Muhyiddin will be allowed to give his customary winding-up speech is also uncertain. Umno secretary-general Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor has said the Umno supreme council will decide on it, but chances are he will not be allowed to speak.

Whether barring Muhyiddin is



A silhouette is captured on the Umno flag outside the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) as it prepares for the Umno general assembly.

democratic or otherwise is debatable. What matters is that Muhyiddin seems doomed to be effectively reduced to a mere spectator at the general assembly.

"It goes to show the power of incumbency... once you rebel, everything goes against you," said Dr Sivamurugan Pandyan of Universiti Sains Malaysia.

While Muhyiddin is the clear and present danger for Najib in Umno, he has allowed too much water under the bridge since his July sacking from the Cabinet.

He could have toured the country and rallied the grassroots behind him, like what former deputy prime ministers had done in 1988 and 1998.

But he did not.

"Muhyiddin and his supporters failed to do this and he is also unlikely to join PKR or PAS," Dr Oh said. His "sacking narrative" too is also unlikely to dominate the assembly.

Similarly, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a trenchant Najib-critic, has effectively been sidelined as a mere guest, one of many at the assembly.

"As a guest he cannot speak or address the assembly," said an Umno division chairman.

The rebellion among branch leaders that Najib's critics had hoped would grow, has fizzled out, leaving about a dozen branch leaders in hot water.

Only a few months ago, the future looked really bleak for Najib. Everybody was counting the days when he would step down.

But his fortunes may have finally turned.

Najib is all set to dominate the Umno general assembly. He will show delegates he has tightened his grip on Umno, consolidated his position in government and vanquished all his critics.

"Najib, it appears, has emerged from the eye of the storm very much stronger than anybody had expected him to," said Dr Oh.