

Roused by racial jibes, Umno may forget Najib's unity plea

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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 1 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak will face difficulty trying to preach his unity and transformation agenda today to an Umno general assembly that has already rejected his pleas for moderation, an analyst has said.

Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) chief executive Wan Saiful Wan Jan predicted the Umno president would likely adopt a more diplomatic approach when criticising Pakatan Rakyat, refrain from using racial slurs and would instead "sound Umno's clarion call for unity" to rally his troops ahead of the coming polls.

But, he said, this approach may not go down well with party conservatives who have already been roused over the past two days by speeches demonising PR as anti-Malay, anti-Islam, "agents of Christianisation", "bapok" (transvestites), "bangsat" (bastard) and "pondan" (effeminate).

As such, Wan Saiful said Najib is now in a quandary as he would likely face a "resistant Umno" if he adopts an overly-progressive stance and push for change and moderation.

"The battle now is between Najib and Umno. If he pushes the party towards progressiveness and change, there is a likelihood there will be a large movement that will retaliate and reject him," he told The Malaysian Insider.

He said Najib would have to find the balance between his roles as the president of a race-based party and the prime minister of a multiracial country.

"I suspect he will do both things: try to say that he is protecting the interests of the Malays but, at the same time, claim he is the PM for all Malaysians," said Wan Saiful.

Political analyst Ong Kian Ming agreed that Najib would likely avoid racial slurs or resort to demonising PR with "anti-Islam" accusations, but said the prime minister would also have to make references to how Malays have to stand united under Umno's banner.

"He has to play the more neutral role of the diplomat. He would likely point to the larger weaknesses of PR and it is most important that he highlights his various transformation programmes that he has put in place," he said.

Najib's deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, set the tone for the general assembly by exploiting the race card when opening the party's Youth, Wanita and Puteri wings' annual meets on Tuesday night. In a fiery speech, the deputy prime minister told Umno to defend the Malay race, culture and institutions from PR, which he accused of being an anti-Islam and anti-Malay force.

The Youth assembly yesterday saw delegates engage in more PR-bashing, with leaders resorting to name-calling when warning that the Malays would lose power under the pact's rule.

Professor Dr Jayum Jawan warned against public backlash if Najib does not reprimand party leaders today for resorting to foul language to unite its members.

"This will not endear him to the electorate. This is the 21st century, not the 1960s or 1970s. He must cover this ground," he said.

"They are the ruling party... they should set the standard for others and avoid personal attacks and such language. They should be parading their successes instead of bashing the opposition," he added.

Umno is currently holding what is likely to be its last general assembly before a general election expected early next year.

Najib is said to need a marked improvement from the last polls to retain his position as only a return of BN's customary two-thirds majority of Parliament can guarantee he remains in office.

BN ceded 82 federal seats and five state governments to the opposition in the landmark March 2008 general election

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