

Saifuddin: Suicidal for Umno to bring down Najib or leave moderate path
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By Ida Lim

KUALA LUMPUR, May 13 — Umno will be committing suicide if it attempts to bring down its president Datuk Seri Najib Razak or leaves the moderate path, Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, the Umno politician seen as among the most progressive in the party, has said.

The outspoken Umno politician said the Barisan Nasional (BN) component party should stop complaining about the ruling coalition's failure to recapture a two-thirds parliamentary majority, explaining that this scenario would not happen in a democratic country.

"If because of this (you) want to ask the prime minister to step down, that is a wrong KPI (key performance indicator)!" Saifuddin (picture) said, referring to Najib, who is also the prime minister and BN chairman.

"Furthermore, Umno obtained a better result than in the March 8 elections, Umno members should acknowledge, Najib's performance was far better than former Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Badawi," the former Umno deputy minister was quoted as saying in an exclusive interview published by the Sin Chew Daily today, referring to the March 8, 2008 general election.

On May 5, Najib led Umno to a win of 88 federal seats, an improvement from the 79 seats during his predecessor Abdullah's rule in 2008.

But BN only won a total of 133 federal seats, down from its 140-seat win in 2008 and the 148 seats required for a two-thirds majority. The coalition also lost the popular vote despite forming the federal government — the first time since the 1969 elections where it had contested as the Alliance Party.

Despite the less-than-heartening polls results for BN, Saifuddin reminded Umno members not to forget that Najib was BN's best product and had aided the coalition's victory, saying that any attempt to bring the leader down would be suicide.

Najib was seen by observers to have driven the BN and Umno election campaign with his personal popularity, as he remained more popular than the parties in opinion polls.

Saifuddin also said that Umno has to continue taking the moderate path, saying it would be suicidal for the BN lynchpin party to lean towards the right.

"Umno's future direction and path will be decided by the composition of the supreme council after this year's party elections," the Umno supreme council member said.

He explained that currently the Umno supreme council could be divided into three groups, namely the "Yes, President" group, a small group of "Malay extremists" and a even smaller group of progressives.

With the "Yes, President" group being the largest in the Umno supreme council, Saifuddin said it was likely that the prime minister's policies would continue to receive great support.

Although Najib had introduced the inclusive concept of "1 Malaysia", right-wing elements

within Umno had at times openly contradicted the policy.

The struggle between conservative and progressive forces in Umno was also illustrated by BN's fielding of Perkasa vice-president Datuk Zulkifli Noordin, while former Umno leader Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had openly backed Perkasa president Datuk Ibrahim Ali. Both leaders from the Malay right-wing group lost in the May 5 polls.

All eyes will now be on the Umno party elections, where the party that won 240 out of BN's 275 state seats will decide on whether Najib will stay on as president, or whether 66-year-old Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin will be challenging the 59-year-old for the post.

In an interview with Sinar Harian, Saifuddin again raised the proposal that members be accepted directly into BN instead of having to join the coalition's component parties.

"Now we already have 'friends of BN' but I think that is not enough, they want to be BN members, they want to carry cards as BN members.

"All the arrangements have to be thought of, it means that component parties can continue to operate as usual, no problem; I will also stay in Umno, no thoughts of leaving, but there are some people like my child, or other youths, they don't want to be Umno members, they want to be BN members."

He explained that youths saw that most of the parties in BN were ethnic-based parties and viewed it as a model that was suitable for the independence era.

The younger generation now wanted a new model where they could be direct members of BN, Saifuddin said.

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