

Malaysia's Najib: Jump or be Pushed

Asia Sentinel

Wednesday, 08 May 2013

Written by John Berthelsen

Election aftermath could soon claim its real loser, the current PM

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, having been instrumental in driving his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi from power in 2009 after a poor electoral performance, now may be poised to try to do the same thing to the current prime minister, Najib Tun Razak.

It may depend on whether Najib jumps or is pushed, however. The premier is said to be disillusioned and discouraged and may leave the premiership at the United Malays National Organization annual general meeting in October, handing over power to the current vice president Muhyiddin Yassin, sources say - if he lasts that long. Najib led the Barisan Nasional to its lowest vote total since independence at 46.66 percent of the popular vote to the Pakatan Rakyat coalition's 50.1 percent, taking a diminished 133 seats in the parliament to Pakatan Rakyat's 89 - amid allegations of voter irregularities that put the Barisan over the top.

"I am told that Najib will hand over to Muhyiddin in October," a lawyer with close contacts to UMNO said. "The change may finally come but voluntarily between Najib and Muhyiddin. We'll have to let it play it out some more."

That could foreshadow months of instability inside the UMNO leadership as a weakened Najib hangs on to power in the face of a wing of the party that wants to double down on the policies that have led to diminished returns in the last two elections. Toppling him now for Muhyiddin could well lead to costly party rifts, as it did in 2009 with the Badawi faction of the party. A change would probably signal that UMNO will steer to the conservative right, counterintuitive to what the electorate appears to have been saying. It was UMNO moderates such as Khairy Jamaluddin and Shahrir Samad who profited in the election while Malay nationalists Ibrahim Ali and Zulkifli Noordin were soundly defeated.

The Mahathir wing appears disdainful of Najib's 1Malaysia strategy, which calls for an emphasis on ethnic harmony and national unity. If anything, the 87-year-old former prime minister, with his sponsorship of the Malay nationalist NGO Perkasa, appears to be reverting to his days as a Malay firebrand that got him kicked out of UMNO for several years before he was reinstated by Najib's father, Tun Abdul Razak.

However, Mahathir, a source said, "campaigned hard for Najib and the Barisan Nasional. The Doc (Mahathir) let Najib do what he wanted pretty much. Najib led UMNO with his Economic Transformation Program, Government Transformation Program, etc. Now that the results weren't good Najib has to take responsibility. Most

importantly, I get the sense that Najib was completely devastated and doesn't want the job anymore. Furthermore, Muhyiddin can fight fire with fire against DAP's race campaign."

It thus remains to be seen if Najib's ETP and GTP programs, the cornerstone of his government policy, are at risk, emphasizing as they do competitive bidding instead of special privileges for ethnic Malays. Muhyiddin, although not as strident as other Malay nationalists, nonetheless is closer to Mahathir's line of thinking than many are comfortable with.

Most observers say the Barisan, at Najib's direction, veered between publicly conciliatory statements on race but used a de facto strategy that exacerbated what was already a growing divide between majority ethnic Malays, who make up 60.1 percent of the population, and the Chinese, who make up about 25 percent. The government basically abandoned the historic racial mix of ethnic Malay, Indian and Chinese parties that had ruled the country since independence for 56 years, attempting to use fear of Chinese dominance of the economy to drive rural ethnic Malays to the polls.

That may not be enough for the Mahathir wing. The source said that "We advised Najib against pandering to Chinese unreasonable requests. He bent over backwards to the Chinese where those resources could have gone to other rural or bumi constituencies. Now UMNO wants Najib to take responsibility."

That's certainly news to the Chinese. The Mahathir faction appears to be ignoring the fact that more ethnic Malays in Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Parti Islam se-Malaysia together voted with the ethnic Chinese for the Pakatan Rakyat coalition than voted for UMNO. It was votes from the non-Malay east Malaysian states that put UMNO over the top.

As in the electoral debacle of 2008, the hardliners in UMNO deny that the party needs reform, and failing to do so will probably drive more voters into the hands of the opposition. Najib during his term hasn't been able to firmly steer UMNO into the directions he wanted to go. UMNO needs reform and there is no one in sight who can drive it. The biggest problem is that the party doesn't want to reform itself. It is evident that Najib, under constant fire on corruption charges himself, over the last few years hasn't been able to steer UMNO into the directions he wanted to go.

"The current elections showed the true meaning of the people's power in putting the candidates they feel best in representing them in the parliament and despite of the systemic electoral fraud that happened, the people's voice was still strong in sending a message," said Lena Hendry, coordinator of the Malaysian Popular Communications Center for Human Rights, in a prepared release. "It is wrong the politicians from the current ruling government say that it was the Chinese who caused the tsunami as this is not true, as many seats also had winning or losses when the majority was of other communities."

The country has "long passed the era where race and religion was the main weapon by politicians to get the support of people. People are focusing on bigger issues now which is plaguing the country such as corruption, abuse of power, transparency and many

others and demanding answers from the leaders of the country. There is a new shift in national politics that redefines ethnic relations and go beyond it in Malaysia. The government must bear the responsibility to educate, reformulate and change society instead of reinforcing racial stereotype in politics. This must stop."

Mahathir telegraphed his wing's views in a press conference on May 7 to tell reporters he was shocked by the Barisan's performance and laid the blame on "ungrateful" Chinese and "greedy" Malay voters.

"Most of the Chinese rejected the Malays' hands of friendship ... And that was what we call the 'tsunami'," Mahathir said, adding that "At the same time, we cannot deny Malays who have become greedy. They all want power without considering the means, if they needed to sell out their race they will sell it out."

Although since the election Mahathir hasn't publicly disclosed his rejection of Najib as party leader and premier, he has signaled his irritation by telling reporters that UMNO would have to decide whether Najib Razak should step down, questioning Najib's strategists and saying their ideas may have contributed to BN's poor performance.

Copyright © 2005 - 2013 Asia Sentinel.

Source:

http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5401&Itemid=31

