

Even as he's set to stay as Umno president, Najib still has to deal with warlords
Malaysian Insider
Sept 20 , 2013
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With Datuk Seri Najib Razak a shoe-in to retain his presidency at the Umno polls next month, the question now shifts to this: Will he be able to perform effectively considering that he had to capitulate to the demands of the party's right wing?

Since taking over the helm of the country in 2009, the country's sixth prime minister has styled himself as a moderate leader who is committed to reforms.

Faced with rising public calls for it, Najib took steps to push for change, including repealing security laws considered draconian and promoting a more multiracial agenda.

But his critics said those were just "cosmetic changes" that avoided deep change.

Conservative forces within his Malay party also stymied Najib, especially those linked to influential former president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has resisted change and pushed for a more Malay-centric platform.

As such, while Najib is likely to continue with his reformist agenda after his party elections, do not expect anything drastic or ground breaking.

It is likely to be a token effort, dependent on how much his party, or its powerful warlords, allow him to do.

As DAP strategist and Member of Parliament Liew Chin Tong puts it, "He squandered his opportunities when he first came in and he will continue to do so."

Although Najib has talked about change and renewal for Umno, he is also a cautious leader and might not want to rock the boat so much so that he risks alienating conservatives within the party, many of whom are still hankering for the years when a decisive Dr Mahathir was heading a much stronger Umno.

This was apparent when Najib indicated his wish for the status quo of the incumbent vice-presidents to remain and threw his tacit support behind some conservatives in the supreme council such as Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

Ideally, Najib, who is the son of the country's second prime minister, should be given the support to implement badly needed reforms that will jumpstart the economy, weed out corruption and tackle the rising cost of living – measures that will ensure the country remains competitive and attractive to investors.

"I think he would push for measured reforms after the party elections, but it won't be drastic. It will likely be gradual as the hardline and right-wing elements in the party are strong and will likely oppose initiatives seen as undercutting the party's popularity with rural Malay folks," said respected Merdeka Center pollster Ibrahim Suffian.

In the 13th general election, Najib's multi-ethnic Barisan Nasional ruling coalition, of which Umno is the backbone, won 133 of the 222 parliamentary seats, ceding seven seats to the

opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition when compared to the 2008 national polls.

It also lost the popular vote, securing only 47% compared to the opposition's 51%.

However, Umno won 88 seats, up from the 79 it had previously, due to support from rural Malays and Bumiputeras.

If Najib gives way to the hardliners, Umno risked being abandoned by the voters at the next general election, warned his party colleague and three-term Pulai MP Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed.

"Support for BN has dropped since the 2008 elections. If Umno becomes more conservative, then voters will have more confidence to kick them out at the next election," he said.

Moderate Umno politician Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah echoed those worries when he expressed the hope that the 150,000 members set to vote in the top office bearers will choose progressive-minded leaders.

"I think Najib is doing well as far as transformation is concerned but he needs to go for more in depth for the good of the party and country by taking more reformist and inclusive approaches," he said. – September 20, 2013.

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