

Najib's supporters want answers at March 8 'solidarity rally'
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By Sheridan Mahavera

For someone who has been dubbed the strongest Umno president ever, this weekend's solidarity rally for Datuk Seri Najib Razak raises questions about his actual invincibility.

His main critics on a whole range of issues, from the economy to the debt-laden 1Malaysia Development Bhd, are his political foes across the Parliament aisle.

Najib's supporters, however, are more keen to show his strength within the party, which dominates the ruling Barisan Nasional.

Even with attacks from former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Najib remains in a strong position in Umno and is, in fact, its strongest president with no signs of any visible challenge to his number one post.

So why a rally as a show of support?

Datuk Seri Syed Ali Alhabshee, the meeting's chief organiser, rubbishes views that the meeting is to deal with rifts in the party, but other Umno leaders say it will be a chance for grassroots leaders to question the prime minister and make him answer some of the criticism.

It is still a sign that not all is 100% well in Umno and that the questions about Najib's leadership and his family's spending are causing worry that these would erode public support for the party.

Party sources also say these issues, especially when they are fanned by Dr Mahathir and former finance minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, have bolstered those who want to oust Najib.

Syed Ali, who is also Cheras Umno division chief, said the party was united. "If we were divided, we would not meet up. It is because we are united that we are meeting up," he said, adding that the meeting was initiated by several division chiefs.

It is meant to show that Umno's 191 divisions are fully behind its president and prime minister as he weathers attacks.

But division leaders, who represent the party's middle management and are tasked with building public support for Umno, are having trouble explaining to people why Najib is under attack.

Critics, such as veteran DAP lawmaker Lim Kit Siang said the need for such a meeting showed that there was indeed turmoil in Umno as Najib came under fire locally and internationally.

At home, Pakatan Rakyat and the media have relentlessly published exposes on the questionable business deals of 1MDB, Najib's brainchild, which has so far accrued debts totalling RM42 billion.

His family's wealth was also put under the spotlight when American newspaper The New York Times ran a story highlighting property purchases made by his stepson and questioned how his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor could afford expensive jewellery.

On February 23, Rosmah was further ridiculed when she made a comment on how a home service hair dresser wanted to charge her RM1,200 to dye her hair.

Syed Ali conceded that although the main aim of the meeting was to show solidarity with their boss, division chiefs were also interested in what Najib had to say about these issues.

"We want to hear from the horse's mouth," said Syed Ali, declining to specify which issues would be brought up.

Strong in Umno, vulnerable in public

A Kedah Umno division activist said there were no major rifts in the party but the meeting would create the perception of one.

This is since Umno is still far from its next party elections and so far, there has been no one in the party challenging the president, whether officially or unofficially.

In Umno, Najib was in a strong, stable position, the activist said, despite strident criticism from Dr Mahathir and his supporters.

Another source from Johor Umno said one problem with the pro-Dr Mahathir movement to oust Najib was that it could not find a leader or personality to rally around and back against the president.

Najib's deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, whom they hoped would be their candidate to replace his boss, has signalled that he was not interested in the plot.

Members were also sick of Dr Mahathir's tirade as they sound hypocritical coming from a former prime minister who had his own fair share of financial and political scandals, said the Johor Umno leader who declined to be named.

"When (Dr) Mahathir does this twice, first to Pak Lah (former prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) and now Najib, both of whom are his successors, members start to question if (Dr) Mahathir really knows what he is doing."

When a meeting like this was called when Najib faced no real threat within the party, people would start to think the opposite, that the president was under siege, said the Kedah Umno activist who requested anonymity.

“People will start to think, is someone really trying to overthrow the president? (This meeting) is a Pandora’s box.”

Though Najib may be almost untouchable within the party, there is a real fear that issues, especially concerning his family’s wealth and the behaviour of his wife, would eat away at Umno’s support base of rural and working class Malays.

Rosmah’s quip about hairdressers and details of the NYT expose were becoming juicy gossip among Umno members and voters who were pro-Umno, said the Kedah Umno activist.

Talk of such lavish lifestyle when the majority of Malaysians were worried about inflation, the goods and services tax and about making ends meet would impact on support among on-the-fence voters.

“There is a worry that Najib’s problems will bring Umno down among voters,” said the Kedah Umno activist.

Datuk Johan Abdul Aziz of Selangor Umno, admitted that division chiefs wanted the president’s explanation on issues such as 1MDB to respond better to public criticism.

“We want explanations on what the whole issue is about so that we can defend the boss in public,” said Johan.

But the Kedah Umno activist doubted that such a meeting would help Umno respond effectively to the public perceptions these issues have created about Najib.

“There is a feeling among voters that Dr Mahathir is the same as Najib. At the end of the day, they just have to throw (out) BN (Barisan Nasional).” – March 5, 2015.

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