

## **Is an Umno rebellion gathering steam?**

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**By Sheridan Mahavera**

Unrest is spreading among the Umno grassroots, barely a week after its president Datuk Seri Najib Razak broke with convention to sack the party's number two, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, from the Cabinet.

The disquiet over Najib's contentious decision is the latest challenge to the embattled prime minister, who is battling allegations of receiving billions of ringgit linked to troubled state investor 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

Although Najib has a firm grip on the 199 divisions that are the middle tier of the party's leadership, there is still a chance that grumblings among the lower rank and file could snowball and threaten his presidency.

### **Grumblings turn into debates**

More than ever in Umno's history, the party's low-level branch members, who number more than a million, feel that they should have more say in the leadership's decisions.

Kepong Umno division secretary Ahmed Zaharani Yusof Omar said this was because the branch leadership currently elect the party president and deputy president.

This made ordinary members feel more invested in who they choose to helm the party, said Zaharani, on the understanding that by convention, the top two leaders become the prime minister and deputy prime minister respectively.

But so far, most of the dissatisfaction has been voiced through proper channels such as branch and division meetings, said Zaharani.

"It's healthy for the party for members to voice their opinions and it proves that we are open and democratic."

The grumblings have translated into heated debates breaking out in Umno branches and divisions in Johor and Selangor, especially among the party's youth wings.

There are reports that youth wing members in Johor and Selangor have also tendered resignations from decision-making posts to protest Najib's decision.

On the other extreme, said Jerai division vice-chief Datuk Ahmad Ikmal Ismail, some divisions have cancelled invitations to Muhyiddin and party vice-president Datuk Seri Shafie Apdal to open their assemblies.

Shafie was also dropped as the rural and regional development minister in the Cabinet reshuffle.

"Everyone is still surprised over the reshuffling and given who the personalities involved are, there will be emotional reactions on both extremes," said Ikmal.

What complicates things, said a Hulu Selangor Wanita Umno division leader, is that division chiefs are also at a loss on how to make sense of the Cabinet reshuffle.

"When you try explaining to younger members especially, they will counter your arguments with stuff they find on social media," said a Wanita Umno official who requested anonymity.

"So some division chiefs refrain from saying anything until things cool down over time."

### **Building momentum**

That approach could also give dissidents the momentum to push their agenda through the hundreds of division meetings that will go on till the beginning of September.

For now, the grumblings are still manageable, said Zaharani.

"I don't think there will be a snowball effect and rebellion against the president."

But he admits that it's still early days and things can change if disgruntled members try to get their divisions to push for a re-instatement of party elections this year.

The Umno Supreme Council has postponed by 18 months party elections scheduled for next year.

Political analyst Wan Saiful Wan Jan said the party elections would be the most direct way to challenge Najib and his leadership.

"But to do that, the rebels must push for the elections to be re-instated and they have to start this movement soon while there is still momentum," said Wan Saiful of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas).

Although the unrest is still contained, Wan Saiful said, a wide-scale revolt cannot be dismissed.

At the end of the day, said another Umno leader from Selangor, members are worried that the party's internal problems can affect its ability to perform in the 14th general election. – August 4, 2015.

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