

Does it really matter if Muhyiddin gets sacked from Umno?

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By Sheridan Mahavera

If the general election was called tomorrow, Umno still “will die”, said two upset Umno activists at the end of the party’s general assembly yesterday.

Their views reflect the larger picture that confronts Umno even as its members and pundits debate whether its discontented deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin will be sacked.

This was because, said the two activists – one from the Ipoh Timur division, in Perak, and the other from Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur – the fate of the party rested in the hands of voters who did not really care about Muhyiddin’s fate.

Their main concerns included how public transport rates had gone up and how the goods and services tax (GST) was eating into their grocery bills.

These are the bread and butter issues that are going to make or break Umno in the next general election.

“People are really suffering out there and here we have leaders who are getting billions of ringgit into their accounts,” the Ipoh Timur member told The Malaysian Insider, requesting anonymity.

He said his views were widely shared among ordinary Umno members, even as the thousands who thronged the assembly over five days pledged allegiance to president Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

“Members are angry with the current leadership but they are too afraid to speak up,” said the Ipoh Timur member.

Their colleague, Gopeng Wanita Umno chief Datuk [Hamidah Osman was a case in point](#) – she was sacked from the party last month because she demanded that Najib resign.

“And yet that is what needs to happen. Many members feel that he needs to go if the party is to have any hope,” said the Bukit Bintang member.

An Ipoh Timur member says ordinary Umno members are angry with the current leadership despite many pledging allegiance to Datuk Seri Najib Razak. – The Malaysian Insider pic by Nazir Sufari, December 13, 2015.

Overriding issues

As it is, Umno and the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition it leads only managed 47% of the popular vote in the 2013 general election. This was even when the party was strong and everyone, including Muhyiddin, was behind Najib.

Now, said independent pollster Ibrahim Suffian, cost of living issues, a shrinking ringgit and the GST were eating away support for BN and Umno.

Economic issues were almost always a determining factor in elections, said Ibrahim, executive director of the Merdeka Center.

"In 2008, the economy was an overriding issue and the BN lost heavily."

In places like Penang, for instance, a strong machinery and experienced leaders did not stop BN from losing the state.

But a divided Umno, caused by members and supporters disgruntled at the leadership, could influence how badly the party performs.

"When you have a big, overriding issue, then every single vote counts. So a schism in the party could cause supporters who would normally come out to vote to stay at home or vote for someone else.

"A division in the party when sentiments are like this could be fatal," said Ibrahim.

The Bukit Bintang member alluded to this, saying that it was near impossible now to canvass for support among the people.

"I'm the one who has to face the voters, I know how hard it is. I tell you, people's perceptions of us are so negative now. We will never get any Chinese votes and Malay votes are uncertain."

But this does not mean that governance issues such as the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal and the RM2.6 billion that went into Najib's accounts will not affect support.

Thanks to social media, said the Bukit Bintang member, there was a perception that rich Umno leaders and their families were disconnected from the problems of ordinary folk.

"People talk about how Najib's family spent all this money on their children's wedding," said the Bukit Bintang member.

Such credibility and integrity issues were hooks, said Ibrahim, that reinforced already-present feelings of disgruntlement.

"An example is the sentiment that the government collects this debt (through 1MDB) and the public has to pay for it through new taxes such as GST," said Ibrahim. – December 13, 2015.

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