

Tussle in Umno for party leader holds key to PM Muhyiddin's longevity

The Straits Times

JANUARY 28, 2021

Shannon Teoh

Malaysia Bureau Chief

KUALA LUMPUR - A battle for control of Umno, sparked by the sudden withdrawal of support for Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, will decide not just the fate of Malaysia's grand old party, but also the fortunes of the ruling Perikatan Nasional (PN) pact.

Since backing Tan Sri Muhyiddin's palace coup in March 2020, Umno has been the most disgruntled of allies, often loudly demanding a bigger share of the spoils as PN's largest member.

Fast forward 11 months, and scores of Umno divisions have passed resolutions to sever ties with Mr Muhyiddin's Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu). Adding insult to injury, two MPs from the once-dominant party publicly announced that they no longer supported the Premier, leaving him with a minority government.

But Umno president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi's hopes of beginning 2021 with a sudden reset of the political chessboard by forcing snap polls were dashed,

with Mr Muhyiddin effectively gaining immunity after the King assented to his request for emergency powers on Jan 11 to fight an unrelenting surge in Covid-19 cases.

The declaration gave Mr Muhyiddin, who is Bersatu leader, the power to suspend Parliament during the seven-month-long emergency. It also explicitly stated that there would be no change in government until the order was lifted, possibly earlier than August should a bipartisan but ultimately government-controlled panel deem it fit to do so based on the Covid-19 situation.

Mr Muhyiddin has promised fresh polls once the emergency is over. His hopes, though, of remaining in power will be much better if Umno remains a willing partner, rather than an opponent splitting the vote which, more than likely, will benefit the opposition led by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition.

"The parties currently in PN are likely to collectively win a majority of seats unless Bersatu and Umno split the Malay majority vote too much, letting opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim slip through the middle," risk consultancy Eurasia Group's Asia director Peter Mumford told The Straits Times.

"The result of a three-way battle may be that the next premier will not be known on election night and instead come down to post-vote negotiations," he added.

Zahid's rivals, in the meantime, smell blood, with Umno leadership polls looming in the middle of this year.

Official sources say Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein and Federal Territories Minister Annuar Musa are leading figures among those who want to steer the party on a path of cooperation with Bersatu. Umno's deputy president, Mohamad Hasan and Senior Minister for Security Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the party's top-ranking Cabinet member, are among the others standing to benefit from Zahid's ouster.

"They may not even need to challenge Zahid, as his corruption trial should reach a verdict soon," one official in the ruling PN pact told ST.

Zahid, a former deputy premier, as well as several of his allies, have been battling court cases which went to trial more than a year ago while PH was in power. The prosecution in his case is set to rest next month. Party rules bar convicted members from contesting leadership positions.

Zahid took over as party president from disgraced former premier Najib Razak after Umno lost the 2018 election and its six-decade grip on power. The party president claims that 143 out of 191 divisions resolved to cut ties with Bersatu but ST has learnt that only 81 officially did so.

The splits in Umno were clearly apparent when Zahid sacked Tan Sri Annuar - seen as a pro-Muhyiddin figure - as secretary general of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. That led to a series of exposes by Mr Annuar which tarnished the party president.

He claimed Zahid's graft charges were clouding his judgment, leading to controversial decisions such as pledging the party's backing for Datuk Seri Anwar to oust Mr Muhyiddin.

Such a move is antithetical to many in Umno, and the party's supreme council has decided it would not work with the PH chief especially as the PH coalition includes the Democratic Action Party, which has been accused of having an anti-Malay-Muslim agenda.

Several Umno youth leaders have openly called for Zahid to make way - either immediately or at the party election - while banners and poison pen fliers calling for his resignation have popped up around the country.

"Umno needs a total revamp. Umno needs an Avengers team, someone who is not only accepted by the members but also by the people," Federal Territories youth chief Nizham Abdullah Hamidi said earlier this month, in a tongue-in-cheek reference to the superhero movie franchise.

Although other senior figures aligned to Zahid have criticised such calls, they have continued to grow louder.

Datuk Ahmad Tajuddin Sulaiman, division chief of Paya Besar in Pahang said last week: "The direct impact of charges of wrongdoing against Umno's leadership is an obstacle burdening Umno's recovery."

**SPH Digital News / Copyright © 2021 Singapore Press Holdings Ltd.
Co. Regn. No. 198402868E. All rights reserved**

Source: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/tussle-in-umno-for-party-leader-holds-key-to-pm-muhyiddins-longevity>