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UMNO Party Elections: Incumbents in Control, For the Moment

By Shahril Hamdan

SYNOPSIS

The UMNO party elections held soon after Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) were framed as a test of how its members felt about recent events. These included a prolonged period of internal wrangling, UMNO's worst electoral showing in history leading to an alliance in government with old foes, a decision not to contest the top two party posts, and an internal purge of a handful of erstwhile aspirants to top leadership positions. The results show that, for the moment, UMNO members are content to fall in line behind the current leadership, although capacity for change remains.

COMMENTARY

Last weekend, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) concluded its first party elections since 2018 for various positions at the national, divisional and branch levels. Posts totalling tens of thousands were filled for up to five years. The key battles were those at the national level, the results of which indicate that, for the moment, the President of UMNO and Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi retains control over Malaysia's Grand Old Party. At the three national wings (Pemuda UMNO, Wanita UMNO, and Puteri UMNO), party vice presidency and supreme council contests, Zahid's status quo faction emerged broadly victorious. To assess how tight and lasting this grip is, one must take into account the circumstances surrounding the contest, and hence, what might change when the political landscape shifts.

UMNO Elections in Context

In recent times, poor showings in general elections have catalysed change at the top within UMNO. This does not occur strictly through its party elections. Yet the implication that it can, often brought leaders presiding over such showings to leave

their posts before facing the voting party members (now numbering over a hundred thousand). Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not defend the party presidency in the wake of Barisan Nasional's (BN) loss of its two-thirds supermajority in parliament in 2008 and instead handed it to Najib Razak. Najib, in turn, resigned a day after BN lost outright in 2018. In that way, UMNO is not unique – many politicians globally and historically do exit the stage before they are pushed out.

Where UMNO is relatively unique is the power the party accords to the president for as long as he wishes to wield it, to reshape the party landscape in his favour. It is precisely because of the incumbent's willingness to utilise UMNO's idiosyncratic feature – a willingness some have generously referred to as the “killer instinct” – that has allowed Zahid to buck the trend and to strengthen his position within UMNO despite the party's losses in GE15.

President's Men and Women

Among UMNO leaders, thoughts and feelings are rarely expressed explicitly. Instead, conduct is assigned meaning – often about loyalty and affinity to a strand or faction – far beyond what the words themselves say. Individuals are often defined and distinguished not merely by what they do or express, but by what they do not. By that measure, voices that agitated for change and indicated discomfort at the leadership's decisions especially post-GE15, fared badly. Hasni Mohamad, the former Johor Menteri Besar alongside Reezal Merican and Mahdzir Khalid, former cabinet ministers holding various portfolios over the last decade, all missed out by some distance in the race for the three positions of UMNO vice president. Moreover, Johari Ghani, a nationally recognised figure outside UMNO circles who did not receive presidential endorsement, came in third despite having arguably the best reputation among the public.

In contrast, individuals seen as aligned to Zahid – and crucially, not heavily linked to the previous prime ministers Ismail Sabri and Muhyiddin Yassin and their governments – came up trumps. The top two posts for vice president went to Zahid's allies, Wan Rosdy Wan Mohamad and Khaled Nordin, both of whom were not members of the previous government and had shown little enthusiasm for personnel change in UMNO's highest office in the aftermath of GE15. Khaled, especially, is noteworthy for rebuilding his popularity inside party circles by being a vocal critic of the previous two Putrajaya administrations – hence, the aforementioned alignment.

A cursory glance at the rest of the supreme council – the party's highest executive body that comprises (a) those vice presidents alongside the uncontested president and deputy president posts; (b) the heads of the three national wings; and (c) others elected directly to it – indicates the same broad trends. With these elections, and presidential appointments onto the supreme council just done, at least for the moment, Zahid's grip on UMNO is consolidated.

Understanding the Driving Factors

To fully understand how this reality came to be would require an examination of the entire structure and motivations of the party, its members, its decision matrix, and as remarked above, the ability of some to dictate and to operate successfully in the

relevant terrain of contest. For our purposes here, it suffices to say that the new current state was not the only scenario imaginable immediately after GE15. To outsiders unacquainted with UMNO's complex internal power dynamics, it might not even have been the choice forecast. To those within UMNO, the feeling was that this outcome was actually fairly probable once certain things before the party elections went a certain way.

One event is instructive. The resolution pushed through in the January General Assembly barring contest for the top two positions, securing the president (Zahid) and his deputy Mohamad Hasan another term helming UMNO, was of immense consequence. The significance went beyond those top posts, monumental as they are, but also to the rest that were contested. With the biggest sting and danger taken out of the party elections, and with figureheads critical of the president purged from the party before its elections, members fell in line and eschewed individuals seen to be out of step with the leadership. One member remarked in private before the polls, "Zahid is now going to be up there for the foreseeable future, so it's better to be aligned than not".

A Few Mavericks

But how long is this "foreseeable future"? The answer should interest not only UMNO, but the broader Malaysian polity experimenting with a novel form of coalition (national unity) government. If the same dynamics that led to the recent results continue to hold, even a poor showing in the upcoming state elections is unlikely to shake the status quo in UMNO. Other events on the horizon combined may have greater impact, but they would still require certain ingredients that are in short supply, not least of which are figureheads willing to speak up despite risks to their political standing.

However, the provisionality of the above anecdote should remind observers not to foreclose possibilities in the medium term. From some of the results of elections held simultaneously at the 189 divisions, many younger individuals have taken up key roles, including the influential posts of division heads. Notwithstanding the apparent generational shift, at this same local level, individuals not seen to be enthusiastically aligned with the national leadership also held their own. In fact, a couple of ardent defenders of the incumbents won seats on the supreme council but lost contests in their own divisions, specifically in Batu Pahat and Sri Gading in Johor. Put simply, it did not all go one way.

Coming back to the national party, there are also stories that deviate from the overall grand narrative. Besides the election of Johari Ghani, Tengku Zafrul Aziz – a politician only recently and one whose career began under Muhyiddin's prime ministership no less – surprised even his supporters by coming in very close to the top of the supreme council. The female youth wing of "Puteri UMNO" – the most junior after "Wanita UMNO" and the male youth "Pemuda UMNO" – saw a former aide to Ismail Sabri win the leadership contest comfortably.

These individuals, as outnumbered as they are especially at the national level, would appear at first glance to possess latent capacity for heterodoxy. Whether they choose to exercise this capacity or opt to toe the invisible line, is another question altogether. Regardless, the fact that party delegates were prepared to vote for certain candidates

not aligned with Zahid's camp suggests that there is some appetite for alternative directions and futures in the coming years. As with all things UMNO, circumstances of the moment will dictate if the appetite remains just that or is translated into meaningful action.

Shahril Hamdan was the Information Chief of UMNO and Deputy Youth Chief of UMNO before his suspension from the party in January 2023, ostensibly for speaking out against the leadership. Away from frontline politics, he co-hosts a current affairs podcast "Keluar Sekejap" ("Out for the Moment") and is active on the lecture circuit speaking on public affairs and policy advocacy. Leveraging his experience in the public and private sectors, Shahril now advises clients on Malaysia's political economy.

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