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Malaysia's Political Outlook 2014: Key Challenges Facing Najib

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Prime Minister Najib Razak's top-most concern in the new year is not just Umno's dominance but also its very survival. Signals from the recent party general assembly point to a three-pronged strategy to achieve this aim.

Commentary

MALAYSIAN PRIME Minister Najib Razak approaches 2014 with one big worry on his mind: how to win – decisively – the next general election (GE) that has to be called by 2018. The last one seven months ago on 5 May saw his ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition making its worst showing since 1969: despite winning the majority of seats, BN lost the popular vote to the opposition alliance led by Anwar Ibrahim.

As the new year begins, the big signal from Najib is that "1Malaysia" will probably have to be set aside as an electoral strategy. This is significant as it could mean that his vision of a unified, cohesive and inclusive plural society that was much touted in the 2013 GE - is as good as cast to the backburner.

Najib's conservative swing

At the recent general assembly of Umno, the anchor party of the multi-racial BN coalition, 1Malaysia was hardly mentioned in Najib's keynote speech. Yet when resolutions were debated, one delegate sought to kill the whole idea, calling for 1Malaysia to be replaced by "1Melayu" - or 1Malay, referring to the majority community that Umno represents. Najib did not respond in defence of 1Malaysia. Instead his entire rhetoric during the assembly was primarily about advancing the Malay and Muslim agenda - signifying a major refocusing on this core constituency as Umno gears up early for the 14th GE.

Unchallenged as president in party elections prior to the assembly, Najib has one eye on his own political survival. The still influential former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has been uneasy about the BN's worst showing at the 5 May polls and may want to ease Najib out, just as he did to Najib's predecessor Abdullah Badawi. As his popularity dips due to some economic belt-tightening policies expected in the new year, Najib's swing to appease the Umno conservatives is not surprising.

Party hardliners are convinced that the multi-ethnic BN's political survival rests increasingly with Umno, whose survival in turn rests on the Malay constituency, which is synonymously Muslim. While 1Malaysia was designed to embrace all the races, its failure to attract the non-Malays, especially the ethnic Chinese, at the last GE has

weakened Najib's hand.

The conservative faction's argument is this: Forget about winning over the non-Malay vote and focus on expanding the Malay/Muslim ground. Umno is strong enough to stand on its own; while the BN coalition won 133 seats overall in GE13, Umno alone, as its anchor, won the most seats with 88 – even more than any of the opposition parties, whose combined tally of 89 seats was just one more than Umno's. In other words, it is Umno that will remain the backbone of the political system. Thus Malay political power will be pivotal to the country – from political stability and security to economic progress and development.

Umno's three-pronged strategy towards GE14

This conservative logic formed the bedrock of the “back to basics” strategy that was spelt out by Najib, whose speech was themed “Fortifying the Future”. Going forward, Umno will pursue three strategic thrusts – or what Najib called the “three messages from the assembly”: The first is a turn towards Islamic Shariah; the second is a stronger Malay and bumiputra agenda, for which, he said, Umno need not be apologetic; and the third a “transformed Umno” as a “party of the 21st century”. It is significant that Umno as the “party of the future” will become not just more Malay, but Islamist at the same time.

Becoming more Islamist for a Malay-nationalist party like Umno is an equally significant shift. Ideologically-driven Islamist parties actually find ethno-nationalism objectionable. Umno clearly is positioning itself as the primary political vehicle for the Malay and Muslim constituency, thus raising the prospects of an all-out contest for power with the opposition Islamist PAS, even as Umno - paradoxically - woos PAS for unity talks. Umno's drift towards a more Islamist identity was marked by a highly controversial drive to pitch itself as the defender of Sunni Islam in the face of what it paints as the growing threat of Shiism in the country. The Umno constitution would be reworded to define the official religion as “*Islam Sunnah Wal Jamaah*” or Sunni Islam, not simply Islam. That this move is partly politically-motivated is seen in the immediate targeting of the PAS deputy leader as a closet Shia and therefore a threat.

The second thrust of a greater push for the Malay and bumiputra agenda is clearly aimed at solidifying the Peninsular-East Malaysia axis around the Malay core. Najib conceded the crucial role of the “fixed deposit” states of Sabah and Sarawak in BN's ultimate win in the last GE. As many see it, if not for these two states, there would have been a change of government in Malaysia. With Najib's renewed emphasis on the Malay and bumiputra agenda, the New Economic Policy that officially ended in 1990 but was unofficially continued, has finally been resurrected in all but name. CEOs of all government-linked companies have been given KPIs to realise this goal on pain of seeing their contracts not renewed.

To complete the three-pronged strategy, Umno will go all out to win the young voters. In the next GE, some six million new voters will be casting for the first time. The majority are likely to be anti-establishment and anti-Umno. They could make a difference whether there will finally be a change of government or not in GE14. No wonder Najib made it clear: UMNO must win over the young voters and master the social media with which the young are savvy.

Implications

Umno's eagerness to recover its eroded political ground has seen it responding in unexpected ways, with implications yet to be fully fathomed. Its readiness to march to its own drumbeat is a warning to friend and foe alike that the rules of the game will be set by Umno alone.

To its ethnic-based political allies in BN, which are facing their own internal crises, the message is that the BN power-sharing system will be on Umno's terms. To the opposition, the message is clear: whoever controls the Malay and Muslim ground will control power – and it is not going to be the opposition, which is not homogenous ethnically and ideologically.

Umno is desperate to win. Going forward, all stakeholders in the political system will be forced to ponder what this means for them and the country.

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