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Najib and Malaysian Politics in Crisis: Whither UMNO and the Opposition?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

As Prime Minister Najib Razak strikes back at his critics over the 1MDB scandal, questions arise as to where Malaysian politics will go from here, even as the ruling and opposition coalitions reel in their respective crises.

Commentary

MALAYSIAN POLITICS is at an inflection point. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say it is in a mega-crisis. Prime Minister Najib Razak has just countered his critics over the massive 1MDB scandal by sacking his vocal deputy prime minister and the Attorney-General who led a high-level probe. This latest twist has left the country bracing for a backlash of uncertainty. Yet it is not just the ruling UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) government that is in trouble; the opposition coalition is also grappling with its own survival.

It is significant that both sides of the political divide are reeling from unprecedented pressure in disarray - simultaneously. What will come out of this? But it is the crisis in BN that is more critical, given the repercussions reverberating throughout the system due to UMNO's defining role as the ruling coalition's anchor party. The latest crisis in UMNO is equally without precedent.

Leadership crisis in UMNO

Prime Minister Najib Razak is fighting for his political life in the face of severe criticisms arising from the scandal in the 1MDB investment fund which he advises. Never before has a sitting prime minister been openly pressured to step down amid a high-level probe. Never before has there been serious investigation into the dealings of a government-linked investment fund whose chief adviser is the finance minister, who is also prime minister.

While the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has not come as a surprise given his outspoken criticism of the Prime Minister's handling of the 1MDB scandal, the premature replacement of Attorney-General Abdul Gani Patail 'on health grounds' – three months before his retirement - has raised questions. As he was leading the legal team in the special taskforce probing the 1MDB scandal, speculation is rife that his exit is meant to delay the investigation. Gani's replacement was

announced by the government just before Najib's own unveiling of the cabinet reshuffle that elevated his strongest ally, Home Affairs Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, as the new deputy prime minister.

Prior to the reshuffles, Najib's political position had been in doubt. There had been rumours of actions about to be taken by the taskforce, even predictions of a new prime minister by next month. By removing his deputy and the attorney-general, Najib has clearly shown that he intends to stay on top of the crisis. Interestingly, the reshuffles led to the induction into cabinet of Nur Jazlan Mohamed, the equally outspoken chair of the bipartisan Public Accounts Committee, which is also involved in the probe, along with three other UMNO members of the committee. Will the PAC investigation now be muted?

While Najib appears to have strengthened his hand, which he claims is to preserve cabinet cohesion, it remains to be seen if this is enough to fundamentally resolve one of Malaysia's most sensational political crises. Muhyiddin has strong support within UMNO where he is deputy president. There is talk of his further purge, which will deepen the split in UMNO. Equally important is the response of Najib's chief critic, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad. Should there be a major counter-push by Mahathir, Muhyiddin and other forces, Malaysia's political crisis will become more explosive.

Yet, the crisis in the ruling coalition has only just begun. More revelations may emerge and more heads are likely to roll. This latest episode in Malaysian politics is proving to be bruising. Even if Najib survives this, it is hard to imagine how he would emerge unscathed. More worrying for UMNO and BN is whether the ruling coalition will be able to retain power in the next general election, having lost the popular vote at the last polls in 2013 despite winning more than half the parliamentary seats. Muhyiddin made a telling blow when he warned at an UMNO meeting that BN would lose if elections were to be called tomorrow.

Crisis in the opposition

It is fortuitous for UMNO and BN that their political crisis has come at a time when the opposition is in total disarray. The loose opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR), long known to be fragile, has finally come unstuck. Its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, is in jail, while its three coalition partners are in a hyper-fluid state of mutual repositioning. And it's all because of recrimination over *hudud* (Islamic criminal code) between PAS and DAP, two long-standing ideological foes who tried in vain to be friends, leaving the third - Anwar's own party PKR - caught between a rock and a hard place.

The PR is now dead, a victim of the crisis that first began in the Islamist party PAS which led to the dominance of the conservative faction and ouster of its professional wing. Two other partners - the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Anwar's People's Justice Party (PKR) - are trying to reinvent the alliance with a "PR 2.0", linking up with the purged faction but minus the increasingly conservative PAS proper. The final shape of this reinvented opposition coalition is still unclear, but promises to be appealing to a multi-ethnic electorate - and is likely to be led once again by the unifying figure of Anwar, from behind bars.

What we are witnessing is a reconstruction of the opposition landscape. But no matter how it turns out, the opposition forces will be divided into two blocs - for as long as the original PAS remains outside PR 2.0. This leaves open the possibility of PAS linking up with Najib's UMNO to create a Malay-Muslim political alliance in a so-called "unity government".

At this point, an UMNO-PAS linkup is only a theoretical possibility; even the new PAS - the more conservative version - has rejected the notion of a unity government with UMNO. But this position may change depending on how the political equation evolves, both on the opposition front and on the UMNO/BN side. What this all means is that Malaysian politics is entering yet another phase of unpredictability.

What next?

All this is happening at two crucial junctures: Firstly, the country is three years away from the next general election. While this may seem like a long time, it is actually very short given the depth of the crisis on both sides of the political divide. Will they be able to recover in time - if at all - to position themselves for GE14 to capture power? On the BN side, UMNO, as the pillar party, will have to shake

off the severe damage from the political tremors surrounding Najib. It must be said, however, that should he survive the 1MDB crisis, Najib would be very hard to defeat politically.

Secondly, this mega-crisis is five years away from 2020 - the epochal timeline which will mark Malaysia's entry into developed economy status. Ironically it is a visionary deadline set by Dr Mahathir, the man who is now leading the charge to remove Najib. Mahathir would be writhing in ironic chagrin if Najib survives to be the one who delivers Vision 2020 - assuming the economy is unaffected by the political crisis. Mahathir would be happier if it is anyone but Najib as prime minister come 2020. Najib has just shown that he intends to deny his former boss that wish.

Whatever happens going forward, the larger event to watch is the outcome of the "collision of coalitions" in Malaysian politics. Will the system stay the same, or will a new political model emerge from the debris?

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