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Mother of All Elections 2.0: New Crossroads in Malaysian Politics?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Prime Minister Najib Razak, under siege but fighting back, has beaten the war drums for a do-or-die general election that is just around the corner. Will we see UMNO returned to power, or be replaced for the first time?

Commentary

MALAYSIAN POLITICS reached a climax over the 9 December 2017 weekend as UMNO, the backbone of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, went into battle mode to face the impending general election. The 14th election must be called anytime between now and August next year but widely expected to be in the first quarter.

The dominant narrative emerging from the annual UMNO general assembly is a do-or-die “Mother of All Elections” the second time in five years this phrase has been used. BN must not only win big, but also snatch back the two-thirds supermajority it first lost in 2008 and failed to recover in 2013. Is this narrative a reflection of UMNO’s growing confidence of retaining power? Or chest-thumping to whip up the morale of the party that has seen in recent years a series shocks and setbacks, internally and nationally?

UMNO Getting Stronger?

Amidst the current flux in politics, two significant views are emerging. The first is that UMNO is indeed recovering and consolidating itself following the outbreak of the 1MDB scandal in 2015. The serious knock-on effects on BN are obvious given the centrality of UMNO as leader of the coalition. After all the man in the eye of the storm is the prime minister and UMNO president, Najib Razak.

Arising from the crisis, UMNO under Mr Najib has split yet again, leading to the rise of the breakaway Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, also known as PPBM or Bersatu. This new party has among its ranks former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, former deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin who was sacked for questioning Mr Najib on 1MDB, and former chief minister of an important Malay belt state, Kedah (Mukhriz Mahathir).

More fundamentally, the UMNO split – the fifth in its 71-year history - has also altered the national political landscape, with Bersatu entering into an unprecedented alliance with the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition, spiritually led by the jailed Anwar Ibrahim, a former deputy prime minister and UMNO Number 2 himself. The net effect is the unthinkable reconciliation between allies-turned-foes Dr Mahathir and Mr Anwar, and the convergence of one former premier, two former deputy premiers and at least one former chief minister in common opposition to Najib. It is not always that Malaysians see so many high-level former UMNO leaders going into combined opposition against a sitting prime minister, a point not missed at the UMNO assembly.

Despite the split in the ruling party, the expanding opposition alliance and the widening international spillover of the 1MDB scandal, Prime Minister Najib seems secure for now. Such is the power of incumbency. In fact, the UMNO assembly further entrenched the positions of Mr Najib and Mr Zahid with the passing of a resolution to have no contests for their posts when UMNO's party elections are held possibly next year.

Mother of All Elections 2.0

The second view is that Mr Najib is actually on much shakier ground than he would admit, and that the coming general election will indeed be a “do-or-die” electoral battle whose outcome will be critical for his survival. “It is not just another general election,” said Mr Najib. If BN wins again, it could well mean the breakup of the PH opposition, given its current state of fragility; while Mr Najib will be confirmed as the most wily sitting prime minister since Dr Mahathir.

But if for some reason, voters grow tired of all the political shenanigans but chose to remain silent until they decide to vote against UMNO and BN, then Mr Najib will not only be out of power; he could end up in deep trouble. The stakes are indeed very high for him.

While UMNO leaders have touted the criticality of winning back the two-thirds majority, the reality is that many people are sceptical this will happen. Even UMNO leaders talked about this super-majority goal with some guard. Mr Zahid said it is not enough to rely on the strengths of UMNO and BN alone. Mr Najib spoke about the critical need to win over the third group of “persuadable voters” that is “significant to BN” – the “fence sitters”. In other words, UMNO is really not sure of a win this time. Indeed, rarely has Mr Najib talked about “the risk of UMNO and BN losing, and losing everything”.

What If the Opposition Wins?

There are at least two key sources of disgruntlement against the UMNO-led ruling

coalition: rising cost of living which some UMNO leaders are in denial of; and issues of ethics and governance. There are undercurrents of unhappiness among the political and business elites as well as the ordinary public who may well form a significant group of fence-sitters.

Overall, many Malaysians at this point are rather resigned to more of the same. They are so used to the political longevity and entrenched power of UMNO, and by extension BN, that they might not want to rock the boat. They may want the opposition to take over but are afraid of the unknown. Many therefore might either spoil their vote, or stay at home and not face an excruciating dilemma at the ballot box.

This may not be the best outcome for Malaysian politics. But for those who are deeply troubled by what they perceive as the growing rot within the system, a regime change would not be as scary as it seems. In other words, they may be prepared to try out a new government and give it a chance to do things differently. The role of an effective, viable and respected opposition is crucial in this regard.

If the alternative government delivers, it will be voted back to power. If it fails, voters can bring UMNO and BN back to rule. A stint out of power may not be bad for UMNO's soul; it could lead to serious introspection and much needed rejuvenation.

This model of politics is not new. There have been long-serving political parties that have been voted out but came back to power better. Japan's LDP is one example. Other countries where long-serving parties have been dethroned but play influential oppositionist roles instead are Indonesia's Golkar, Taiwan's Koumintang and India's Congress. Is this the crossroads that Mr Najib is talking about?

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