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RSIS Series on Malaysia's 14th General Election

GE14 & the Future of Malay Politics

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

This general election is poised to be game-changing, at the core of which will be the future of Malay politics. Will it resist the undercurrents of change? Or will Malay politics in Malaysia take a new turn, bringing along with it an altered political landscape?

Commentary

MALAYSIA'S COMING general election has long been expected to be explosive, given the tense build-up since the last polls in 2013 which saw the Opposition making significant inroads. But nobody had expected it to take this new turn: UMNO, the backbone of the entire political system, is suddenly facing the dire prospect of being deregistered, the result of a legal challenge by a group of disconcerted members.

The "Group of 16" has taken legal action claiming that UMNO is now an illegal party, having failed to hold internal elections which had been postponed twice, thus denying them the right to elect their leaders. This legal challenge carries unimaginable repercussions, threatening to replay a similar crisis in 1987, perhaps even more severe. If Pandora's Box is thrown open as a result, it could expose UMNO to all manner of possibilities. Given the fluidity, surprises will be aplenty – the Black Swan, as Joseph Liow referred to in an earlier *RSIS Commentary* (24 April 2018).

UMNO Crisis 2.0: How It All Began

It will not be an easy matter for the court to adjudge. In 1987 when UMNO faced a similar debacle, Mahathir was prime minister and UMNO president when his leadership was contested by his popular finance minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

The upshot: the High Court ruled a year later that UMNO was an unlawful society for having unregistered and therefore illegal branches; UMNO was dissolved.

But Mahathir quickly picked up the pieces, mobilised the loose membership to form 'UMNO Baru' (or New UMNO). The new UMNO subsequently took on the body and soul of the original UMNO and gradually morphed to become the New 'Old UMNO', even eventually calling itself just "UMNO", as if nothing had happened.

The big difference this time, 30 years later, is this: The country is on the brink of a critical general election, which takes place on 9 May 2018. If UMNO is going through some deep internal tension as a result, it is as good as an existential struggle. How did it all come to this?

War on Two Flanks

While this year's general election was picking up steam, the political war was expanding into the legal front, and on two flanks. On the first flank, the Registrar of Societies (ROS) ordered the temporary suspension of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM aka Bersatu) – the UMNO breakaway led by the man of the hour, Mahathir – for not holding branch elections.

That did not, however, rattle Mahathir who fell back on his 'Plan B' by rallying behind the banner of PKR, the party of his protégé-turned-nemesis-turned ally again, Anwar Ibrahim, in their combined opposition called Pakatan Harapan (PH). PPBM then countered by suing ROS for acting beyond its powers. This week, on 23 April 2018, the court blocked ROS' temporary suspension of PPBM.

In the meanwhile, a second flank in the legal war was opened when the Group of 16 within UMNO sued their party for failing to hold internal elections within the three-year limit imposed by the party's constitution. Reminiscent of the 1987 crisis, the group's move is now before the court. The judgement can cut either way, of course for UMNO. But waiting for the court's ruling can be excruciating.

What is happening currently is an unprecedented situation in which a defining struggle for power is being played out on both the political and legal fronts – and just days away from when the rakyat or people are about to vote. This vote will be the most critical since the formation of UMNO in 1946. Whatever the outcome, it will be enormously far-reaching. Indeed, will GE14 even come to pass?

Scenarios: Malay Politics, Malaysian Politics

It is now a cliché to say that Malaysian politics is at a crossroads. It is Malay politics that is at a watershed. This has been so ever since BN lost its two-thirds majority in GE12 ten years ago and then the popular vote for the first time, in GE13. Will the downtrend continue this GE14? This coming general election will be an epic battle between two coalitions – BN versus PH, with a third smaller coalition led by the Islamist PAS playing more of a spoiler than a kingmaker role.

Both BN and PH are Malay-led. Whichever side wins, it will still be a Malay-led government, although a Pakatan government is likely to be less bound by communal,

or race-based politics. In so far as there will be a Malay-led government, the polity will remain relatively stable.

But the flux in Malay politics is, by extension, throwing the whole political landscape into fluidity, given the central role of the Malay or Malay-dominant parties on both sides of the political divide. Against this backdrop, two scenarios are playing out:

Scenario 1: UMNO Returns, But Will It Reform?

UMNO is clearly fighting for survival. This is because its leader who is also prime minister, is himself fighting for his political life, saddled by scandals. UMNO and BN cannot afford to lose because Prime Minister Najib Razak cannot afford to lose. That is why the opposition has been thrown obstacle after obstacle along their path towards the election.

Should UMNO be returned to power, this will therefore not be surprising, especially given the changes in the electoral maps to enhance the chances of UMNO/BN candidates. But if the results are not in UMNO's favour, the opposition expects Najib to draw his one last weapon: emergency rule. Even a hung parliament, which is likely, could be cause for emergency rule, should the political deadlock lead to instability.

In the event UMNO is returned to power, it should undergo major reforms so as to remain relevant and recapture its mass appeal, going forward. Ditto for the UMNO-led coalition BN. It can be suicidal for them to ignore the writing on the wall.

Scenario 2: Power Transfer?

But regime change is not something that can be ruled out any longer. Mahathir has even hinted of some "well known BN leaders looking to join Pakatan". This could be his psywar. Or it could be real. While early forecasts put the UMNO/BN as the eventual winner, though by a close margin, this general election is increasingly difficult to read, making it the most unpredictable ever. Even Najib billed it as the "Mother of All Elections". Should UMNO/BN be dethroned, the call for change will be even more deafening.

But an oppositionist role for UMNO/BN is not necessarily a disaster. It could instead be cathartic, even good for UMNO's soul. UMNO/BN could become a strong opposition and an effective check on the new ruling group – and ever-ready to make a comeback. UMNO/BN in the opposition will not be unlike Indonesia's Golkar, India's Congress, Taiwan's Kuomintang and even Japan's LDP.

On the other hand, a Pakatan Harapan victory is not necessarily a setback either for the country. A PH government will provide a fresh change in leadership, governance and perhaps even approach to nation-building. A PH government is not likely to be so reckless as to throw out some fundamentals that have brought the different communities together in forging the Malaysian nation.

A PH government will also have to prove how different it will be from the UMNO/BN government it replaces – not only in terms of vision, mission and plans but also in terms of character and values. What new play will it bring about? How different a

Malaysia will it be under Pakatan Harapan? On 9 May, when the voters decide, they will plant the seeds of the future political landscape.

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