



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 231/2013 dated 18 December 2013

Umno, Islam and Malayness: Going back to Roots

By Afif Pasuni and Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman

Synopsis

The recently concluded UMNO general assembly was seen as a meeting of a Malay nationalist organisation rather than that of a ruling party in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

Commentary

THE UMNO general assembly on 5-7 December 2013 called for more to be done for the Malay community while enhancing the position of Islam and strengthening the political base of the government in the face of a growing challenge from the opposition parties.

In his speech, UMNO president and Prime Minister Najib Razak argued for more governmental effort in upholding Islam as well as defending the sanctity and dignity of the religion. This message was echoed during the assembly debates.

Rewording the constitutional definition of Islam

In line with this, UMNO leaders saw the need to narrow the definition of Islam in the federal constitution and what it means to be Muslim. For one, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the Home Affairs Minister, had proposed to reword the definition of "Islam" in Article 3 of the constitution to include references to "Sunna wal Jamaah", in a bid to curb the spread of Shiism. This attempt is suggestive of the old political competition between UMNO and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) over who can advance Islam better.

Beyond limiting the spread of Shiite teaching, this policy is clearly aimed at positioning UMNO as a defender of Islam, and more pertinently to win support of the Malay voters in the country. Zahid even called for action to be taken against the deputy president of PAS, Mohamed Sabu, for his alleged adherence to Shiism. This is aimed at defining UMNO as upholder of the "right Islam" against the "wrong Islam" espoused by its political adversary, PAS. This was also the strategy pursued by Dr Mahathir Mohamed during his premiership.

The bumiputra emphasis

The subtext of Najib's message, as always in recent years, is for UMNO to be seen as synonymous with the interests of the Malays and bumiputras. This emphasis on bumiputra interests is rooted in several factors. Firstly, many are beginning to have difficulty in distinguishing UMNO as a Malay nationalist party and UMNO as

a member of the consociational BN coalition. While UMNO leads the multi-ethnic BN coalition, it is a political party that is answerable to its voters. Clearly in this case, the bumiputras – especially the Malays – have always been the voter base for UMNO.

Secondly, in the 5 May general election this year, the seats in East Malaysia became pivotal in returning UMNO to power, making up one-third of the total seats won by the party. While pursuing the religious line time and again, UMNO has also assured the bumiputras – who include the non-Muslim natives of Sabah and Sarawak – that their economic interests are at the forefront of UMNO's agenda. The aim is to retain the votes of East Malaysians, thereby safeguarding the party's political survival.

Thirdly, in the consociational arrangement that defines BN, UMNO is adamant about sticking to its age-old maxim: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Despite UMNO giving the impression that it seeks to transform itself for a new era of deracialised politics, what the general assembly has demonstrated is that the party will continue to focus on its traditional bumiputra voter base. Consequently, this puts pressure on its alliance partners, especially the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), to pull its weight in the coalition.

Reforming UMNO

Clearly UMNO has to balance its race-based politics – which has ensured its survival – and its effect on the other parties in the BN coalition. Although UMNO has seen relative success in its policies and politics, this has also eroded the non-Malay support for the BN coalition which UMNO leads. Ultimately as the Chinese and Indian partners in BN, the MCA and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) respectively bear the brunt of voter erosion as a consequence of UMNO's continued dominance.

This puts UMNO at a crossroads: it has to tread carefully between its nationalist roots, and its role as leader of the multi-ethnic ruling coalition. UMNO has clearly chosen to reaffirm its roots at the recent general assembly, which also points to its future trajectory.

The opposition parties are also putting pressure on UMNO as they have – to an extent – demonstrated their readiness to set aside racial politics. Furthermore the internal dynamics of UMNO, a hodgepodge of ideological and business interests, has not helped the party's image among the young. The intense internal politicking within UMNO as well as allegations of corruption are issues that require serious internal reform.

In sum, the 64th UMNO assembly was a showcase for the Malay audience in Malaysia. Speeches were made with the key political objective of winning support of the Malay community. Najib had indeed adopted a strategy of focusing on issues that are seen to be close to the hearts of the Malays such as Islam and the bumiputra policy and assuring them that their rights will be protected. However, these measures will be of little use if UMNO does not reform itself, be it internally by curbing nepotistic practices, or appealing to the other racial groups.

The ethos of justice is also strong amongst younger Malays and any attempt by UMNO to curb the growth of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) alliance will result in a backlash against the party. The key to UMNO's future lies not in how well it deals with PR but how well it is able to institute internal reforms and prepare centrist younger leaders for a future leadership role in the country.

As UMNO Youth leader Khairy Jamaluddin puts it: "Going after Shia Muslims is an important concern, but so is stamping out corruption and wastage of public funds. Otherwise, no matter what we say in the assembly next time, the youth, especially, will not vote for us."

Afif Pasuni is an Associate Research Fellow and Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.