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## NAJIB'S UMNO: ENTER A NEW ERA

Yang Razali Kassim

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*A new leader, Najib Tun Razak, has emerged in Malaysia to take the country into the next phase of nation-building. He has spoken of reform and change within the dominant party UMNO to preserve power. What challenges await in the Najib era?*

ON 22 MARCH, just before taking over as UMNO president, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak spoke to the Malaysian media. With tongue half in cheek, he said he had noticed a new fad within the party in anticipation of his assumption to power: "I hear that some of them opened their speeches with my father's name or even mine. I hear that 'Tun Razak' is back in fashion and that his time has become fashionable."

### Enter the Najib Era

Indeed, the Najib flavour has even gone into space. The country's science and technology ministry named its latest satellite after his father 'RazakSAT'. Fad turned into flood a week later on 26 March at the UMNO party elections that marked a major transfer of power from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Najib, who had won uncontested, was pronounced the party's new president and successor, ushering in with him a fresh team of leaders. His position of prime minister to complete the power transition is now just a ceremony away. On 2 April, Abdullah will convey to the Malaysian king his intention to retire – thus dispelling talk that he may not want to step down as premier despite handing over the party leadership.

Najib's rise has not been without controversy, personal or otherwise. He has however asked not to be prejudged. There are high expectations that his cabinet will further buttress the leadership transition with clean and capable ministers. Who will form the new national leadership revolving around UMNO will therefore be much awaited. Najib's "reform and transform" mantra is timely for UMNO, seen by many within and without as a party in decay. Reversing the threat of oblivion will not be enough for him. The renewal and change have to extend to the ruling *Barisan Nasional* coalition if the new fervour of self-correction is to have a wider impact.

Muhyiddin Yassin, the new UMNO deputy president, will be his deputy prime minister. A man with

vast experience, the former Johor chief minister provides a fresh face as trade and industry minister long held by Rafidah Aziz. The one major controversy that may fester is the stunning election of Khairy Jamaluddin as UMNO Youth chief. Written off by many for being a key factor in UMNO's loss of support in the March 2008 elections and reprimanded by the party for money politics in the lead-up to the UMNO Youth elections, the son-in-law of Abdullah pulled off a major upset. He beat two other candidates, including the favourite, Mukhriz Mahathir, the son of Mahathir Mohamad, the former premier turned critic-in-chief of Abdullah.

### **UMNO in reform mode**

Najib ushered in his leadership in aggressive style. Wasting no time, he stamped his mark with a reformist overdrive, virtually hijacking this theme from his nemesis, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim whose similar anti-corruption campaign partly contributed to his sacking from UMNO in 1998. Najib has to rally the troops and consolidate the party to regain much lost ground. His leadership was immediately demonstrated by the successful wooing back into the fold of Mahathir. The closing of ranks was crucial. For the first time, the public heard UMNO conceding that it could lose power completely if it failed to change its ways and uproot two ogres bedevilling the party -- money politics and power struggles. Leadership elections will now be opened up to bypass centres of money politics. Term limits to office may be introduced. Can Najib pull it off?

Corruption is widely acknowledged to be deeply entrenched. As vested interests get uprooted, the clean-up could provoke a backlash on the new UMNO leader. Yet, Najib has little choice. In three years' time, another general election has to be called with the opposition expected to make further inroads. UMNO and its BN allies are not really ready for such a contest, not without turning around the waning public confidence in the ruling coalition. Will Najib dare to call a snap general election to secure the public mandate that every new prime minister needs? It will be a big gamble unless his reform of UMNO succeeds, and fast.

UMNO's new leadership is being immediately tested by the three by-elections on 7 April, one each in Perak, Kedah and Sarawak. Like it or not, these by-elections will be seen as a referendum of sorts on his leadership, though Najib has dismissed this. The danger of all three seats going to the opposition is real. Should this happen, Najib may be seen as incapable of reversing the anti-BN trend that began with last year's general election. If this snowballs into the next polls, UMNO and the BN could be thrown out of power. Najib will not want to be the last prime minister from UMNO.

### **Najib's Challenges**

The stakes have never be higher for the son of Malaysia's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak. His father became premier in 1970 at a time of crisis. The BN's predecessor, the Alliance, lost its two-thirds majority for the first time, leading to racial riots in 1969. Razak introduced emergency rule after succeeding Tunku Abdul Rahman who was heavily criticised for failing the Malays by UMNO's young turks then led by Mahathir. Razak then introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) to rectify the socio-economic imbalances amongst the races to appease the Malays.

Forty years later, Najib is inheriting this legacy as the sixth prime minister -- also at a time of crisis. Politically, the ruling coalition has lost its two-thirds majority for the second time; ethnic tension is palpable while social cohesion is fraying. Economically, the country is staring at a recession while the NEP that his father conceived is being challenged for its failures by a changing Malaysian electorate.

Najib will certainly not want to go down in history as presiding over a crumbling system. The task that he inherits from Abdullah is tough, though not beyond him. While he has to revive UMNO and defend its leadership of the ruling coalition, he has also to rally Malaysians of all races behind him. He has to be their leader as much as he is of UMNO and the Malays and bumiputras. Can he balance the

seemingly competing demands? His response to this challenge is his “One Malaysia” project that aims to re-emphasise the sense of oneness amongst the various races. How will this vision reconcile UMNO’s doctrine of *ketuanan Melayu* or Malay hegemony with the growing demands of the minorities for more space and liberties to engender a stronger sense of belonging?

Given the highly demanding balancing act required of him, the temptation to play hard ball is strong. To some, the Najib that many people know – seemingly gentle and a safe player -- has gone. A new Najib seems to be emerging, one who is more like Mahathir than Abdullah. Witness the power-grab in Perak that Najib is said to have engineered.

The new prime minister will have to endear himself to a new generation of youthful voters who will make up 40 percent of the electorate by the time the next general election is called. Notwithstanding the return of Mahathir to UMNO, the politics of pragmatism is likely to steer Najib away from the authoritarianism of the past.

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