

By Norshahril Saat

★ Commentary | Commentary

15 Dec 2017 08:51AM
(Updated: 15 Dec 2017 09:00AM)

97 shares



Bookmark



Commentary: UMNO turns inclusive, in the last leg toward Malaysia's general election

Malaysia Prime Minister Najib Razak's talk of UMNO being a party for all Malaysians may have caused some to scratch their heads but ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's Dr Norshahril Saat says it's a well-played political move.



SINGAPORE: The tone of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's opening address at this year's UMNO General Assembly was not unexpected. This would be the party's last gathering before the general election which is due to be held by August next year.

He repeated the same messages on loyalty and unity raised in the previous two assemblies.

But this year's message came with a subtle reminder on UMNO's track record in improving the conditions of minorities in Malaysia.

LOYALTY AND UNITY

At the 2015 UMNO General Assembly, Najib reminded then Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin that the key role of the deputy UMNO president was to assist the president, and that any criticism toward party leaders should not be aired in public.

At that time, Mr Muhyiddin was already asking awkward questions about Mr Najib's role in the 1MDB scandal and the RM2.6 billion (US\$640 million) donation in his personal bank account. He was subsequently sacked from the party in 2016 for his continued criticism of the prime minister.

Similarly, at the 2016 UMNO General Assembly, Mr Najib issued a call for personal support and loyalty from delegates. He also urged Muslims in the country to unite as he painted a grim picture of the country being ruled by the Chinese-majority Democratic Action Party (DAP) if the opposition were to come to power.

In contrast, in his speech at this year's UMNO General Assembly, Mr Najib did not single out any particular leader for disloyalty, ostensibly because all his critics have been removed from the party. His position as party president and that of this deputy Zahid Hamidi's are secure because delegates have agreed that they will not be challenged.



Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak (right), Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (centre) and Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein (left) at the annual UMNO congress. (Photo: AFP)

Unsurprisingly, he also continued to paint a gloomy situation should UMNO lose and the opposition move into power, a scenario he said will lead to the relegation of the role of Islam and the loss of respect for the monarchical institution. He also painted the opposition as a DAP-led coalition that aimed to create a secular state.

These are typical UMNO moves ahead of an election.

UMNO A MULTI-CULTURAL PARTY?

What was surprising this year was that Mr Najib also sought to portray UMNO as a multiracial party. "One issue that I want to clarify is that UMNO is not a racist party. If it is, how can we be accepted as the leader for other parties from different ethnic groups over the years", he said.

Mr Najib also went on to emphasise how UMNO's developmental plans have benefitted Chinese and Indian communities, for instance through the Malaysian Indian Blueprint to aid Malaysian Indian businesses and workers. He added:

" I am shouldering the responsibility to oversee the interests of 32 million Malaysian regardless of race, descent, ideology or religion."

It appears from his speech that Mr Najib is attempting to strike a fine balance, between drumming up the Muslim vote on the one hand, while carefully stressing his credentials in protecting the interests of minorities in Malaysia.

Even though the UMNO General Assembly was primarily a chance for Mr Najib to consolidate his position within the party before the elections, it seems he was also using it as a platform to reach out to voters, especially minorities.

This is one slick move.

Even though Malays and Bumiputeras make up about 70 per cent of the population, minorities can decide the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition's fate including whether they take certain states. Minorities in Malaysia can also determine whether the BN can reclaim its two-third majority in parliament.

History has demonstrated that Malay unity alone cannot guarantee parliamentary dominance, and past prime ministers have to enter elections not privileging any particular ethnic groups, even as some politicians within UMNO may play the race card and resort to fear mongering to whip up conservative votes.

Even within the Malay electorate, it has never been a homogenous voting block, divided along different religious outlooks, and personality differences among Malay elites.

VOTES NOT GUARANTEED

A cursory look at Mr Najib's speech suggests to the untamed eye that the party has indeed become more inclusive and multiracial. Some voters may be persuaded by his oration that the party has indeed been more accommodating towards minorities in Malaysia.

But the majority of voters in Malaysia will likely be more discerning, and will review the party's track record in the last five years and ask if the government has delivered on its promises. Many will compare his speech this year with the one delivered last year, for instance.

The biggest challenge may be internal. While the prime minister himself may uphold progressive views, and he is unequivocally a multiculturalist at heart, the extent to which his party's rank-and-file shares his views remains to be measured, even if his position has been strengthened.

Multiracialism aside, it is probably more important for UMNO to focus on economic issues and clarify what it's doing to alleviate Malaysians' complaints about rising costs of living, as economic issues looks set to be the top concern for most voters.

And the fact that the opposition continues to raise the issue of kleptocracy, associated with the 1MDB saga and the wealth of UMNO leaders, means these issues still have some currency at the grassroots level and can eat away at some votes, if social media continues to sow mistrust surrounding UMNO leaders.

During the UMNO General Assembly, Mr Najib had jokingly referred to a comment former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad once made about the Malays being a community that forgets easily.

In a time where social media platforms archive leaders' past speeches and comments, Malaysian society can judge their politicians' consistency on issues. They will not forget easily.

Norshahril Saat is a fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. He is also an adjunct lecturer with the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore.

Source: CNA/si