

Malaysia Politics in Turmoil

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The anointment of Najib Tun Razak as prime minister could hit some bumps in the road

Against all odds, what been the almost certain anointment of Najib Tun Razak as Malaysia's prime minister appears to foundering as opposition over corruption, high-handedness and other issues mounts,

Najib, Malaysia's scandal-scarred deputy prime minister, had been all but selected as president of the United Malays National Organisation, the leading ethnic political party in the ruling national coalition after the current prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was forced out as party leader late last year. Najib must go through the formality of being named party leader in intra-party elections scheduled from March 24 to 29.

The odds are strong that Najib will get the job. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who has trashed him for being indecisive and too close to corrupt figures, on Friday said he should get the job, although he said he shouldn't bring in any corrupt officials to his cabinet. * However, no date has been announced for his takeover from Badawi, suggesting that there is still uncertainty within the party over his primacy. The party also appears to be reaping a whirlwind by encouraging young outsider candidates to go against established leaders in an effort to clean the stables. The result, a member of an anti-corruption agency told local reporters, is that there have been so many complaints of political bribery and corruption that the board doesn't have the manpower to investigate them all.

UMNO is increasingly in chaos, not just for that reason but because public objections are growing over massive scandals when Najib was defense minister, including the purchase of three French submarines that netted a company controlled by his controversial crony, Abdul Razak Baginda, 114 million euros in commissions. Other scandals included the purchase of Russian Sukhoi jet fighters and substandard patrol boats costing hundreds of millions of ringgit in overcharges from a company owned by another UMNO crony, Amin Shah Omar.

Najib's candidacy has been badly bruised by an extraordinary speech to the Rotary Club in Kuala Lumpur by Zaid Ibrahim, who was appointed by Badawi last year as a minister in the prime minister's office with a mandate to clean out the country's scandal-ridden judiciary. However, Zaid was forced out of office by UMNO stalwarts.

In the speech, which can be found in its entirety here, (see Text of Dato' Zaid Ibrahim's speech) Zaid said the country's political institutions are "hollowed out caricatures, unable to distinguish vested party interests from national ones, unable to offer the man in the street refuge from the powerful and connected. Our social fabric that took us from colony to an independent nation and on through the obstacle of nation-building has reached a point where it sometimes feels like we are hanging on by a thread."

Zaid pointed directly at Najib, accusing him of a "shameful power grab" by overthrowing the elected government in the tin-rich state of Perak, of using a "sledgehammer" in the detention of journalists and of complicity in the award of the military contracts.

However, Zaid's most damaging charge was to make a clear reference to the long-standing reports of Najib's complicity in the sensational murder of Mongolian translator Altantuya Shaariibuu, who was executed by two shots to the head in October of 2006 and her body was destroyed by military explosives. Two of Najib's bodyguards have been the subject of a long-running trial for her murder and Razak Baginda, his best friend, was acquitted under questionable circumstances. The trial has been concluded, but the verdict against the two has yet to be announced. Baginda has left the country for England.

UMNO, Zaid said, "is on a rampage to regain what it lost by any method available and the man who is expected to lead it to victory is the man who succeeds Abdullah: Najib Razak."

Zaid's speech has been studiously ignored by Malaysia's mainstream press, all of which is owned by the major political parties. But bloggers, who played a major role in the election disaster that cost the ruling coalition its two-thirds majority last March for the first time since Malaysia became a nation, have published the speech widely.

In addition, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, the most popular blogger in Malaysia, has published a series of devastating articles on his website, Malaysia Today, including one from the French newspaper Liberation that tied Najib closely to the murder of Altantuya. Raja Petra also published a Malay-language copy of the confession of Sirul Azhar Umar, one of the two men on trial for the murder, in which he named Najib's chief of staff, Musa Safri, as the man who ordered the two alleged murderers to pick up Altantuya from in front of the home of her jilted lover, Abdul Razak Baginda.

The rising concerns over Najib have led to the unlikely possibility that dissident elements within UMNO and the other parties, possibly led by the veteran politician Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, would seek to form a coalition government with elements of Pakatan Rakyat, the three-party opposition coalition headed by Anwar Ibrahim. Others have called on Badawi to stay on, although the king has already accepted his resignation. One opinion poll showed that Badawi has stronger support - a weak 46 percent - than Najib at 41 percent.

Either scenario is farfetched. But in the meantime, UMNO appears to be falling on itself in the factional battle for primacy between the remainder of Badawi's forces, Najib's allies and those aligned with Mahathir Mohamad, who has continued to hammer Badawi and lately has written uncomplimentary remarks about Najib as well, saying he has not been a success as deputy prime minister.

An anti-corruption committee has barred the Malacca chief minister, Ali Rastam, from contesting for the job of deputy president against Muhyiddin Yassin, who is believed to be backed by Najib, on charges of throwing money around to UMNO delegates. At the same time, Mohd Khir Toyo, who is the Najib-backed front runner for the job of leader of the influential UMNO youth wing, was acquitted of the same charges. Apart from Ali Rastam, anti-corruption officials are also investigating the Tourism Minister, Azalina Othman Said and Umno Youth FT head Norza Zakaria, all of whom are reputed to be Badawi supporters and close to Khairy Jamaluddin, who is seeking to become head of the youth wing against Mahathir's son, Mirzan, and Mohd Khir Toyo. That has raised allegations that the anti-corruption agency, installed last year by Badawi, has become politicized.

In addition to attempting to overthrow the state governments now in the hands of the opposition by luring opposition members to the ruling coalition, Najib and UMNO forces have fanned Malaysia's always touchy ethnic divisions by charging Karpal Singh, the national chairman of the opposition Democratic Action Party, of sedition after Karpal announced he would sue the sultan of Perak for appointing an UMNO chief minister after Pakatan lawmakers defected in February, resulting in a 28-28 tie. Karpal's threat of a suit against the sultan was taken by UMNO as a provocation against

the Malay royalty. Karpal's son, also a member of parliament, didn't help, however, when he called Najib a murderer in parliament, which got him banned from the house for a year

"The charges against Karpal are ludicrous because it was during the Mahathir administration that they amended the constitution removing the immunity of the rulers," said a longtime Badawi ally. "During that period, the comments made by Mahathir and his Umno leaders and the editorials in Umno-controlled newspapers were so bad that they should all have been charged with sedition and put behind bars."

P.S.

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