

PERSPECTIVE

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UMNO Revival: Reaffirmation of Ideology or Reform?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The 2018 UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) general assembly was held on 29-30 September. The event, the first after its GE 14 electoral defeat, exposed the divisions within UMNO.
- UMNO leader Khairy Jamaluddin was openly critical of the party leadership under former Deputy Prime Minister Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, citing lack of direction and vision.
- Disunity within UMNO resulted from the following factors: the party's "Islamic" turn; the departure of key leaders; and the fragmentation of the BN (National Front) coalition.
- The assembly also saw UMNO reaffirming its Malay exclusivist and anti-pluralist ideology. It also signalled that the party is edging closer to PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia).
- The way UMNO is structured, and its failure to discuss openly on issues regarding corruption, are the strongest impediments to party reform.

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INTRODUCTION

At the recent UMNO (United Malays National Organization) general assembly, the party's newly elected president, Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi delivered his maiden opening address. The speech, titled "UMNO Revival", raised many interesting issues concerning the party's future direction. It touched on new political realities for UMNO as an opposition party and also emphasised the party's role in defending the institution of the Malay rulers. On the religious front, the speech underscored Ahmad Zahid's anti-pluralism, anti-LGBT (lesbian, gays, bisexual, and transgender), anti-Shia and anti-hedonism stance.¹

The assembly which took place on 29-30 September 2018 was UMNO's first after the divisive party elections held on 30 June. Ironically, the portrait of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad was hung on one side of the auditorium, along with the portraits of other former UMNO presidents—from Onn Jaafar to Najib Razak. Mahathir, who led the party for 22 years (1981-2003), quit the party in February 2016, united the opposition parties, and ended UMNO's 61-years rule of Malaysia in the last election.

Observers expected UMNO leaders to close ranks. Instead, the assembly saw some leaders openly criticising Ahmad Zahid. Already, fragmentation within the party had appeared in several instances after GE 14. The courtship with PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) caused some members to be disillusioned with UMNO's direction. Key points that Ahmad Zahid raised in his opening speech highlighted some of the challenges the party faces, but the proposed remedies to revive UMNO did not only reaffirm its existing ideology but also indicate that the party is moving further right on the political spectrum. The Assembly also ignored the issue of corruption. Cracks within the party appear to have resulted from the party leadership's unclear vision, fragmentation, and weak alliances with other parties in the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

UMNO AFTER GE 14

In GE 14, UMNO suffered a crushing defeat. It did badly in its so-called "fixed deposit" rural seats and FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) estates, and was defeated in formerly stronghold states like Johor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perak. The shocking outcome forced Najib Razak to step down as UMNO president. He has been charged for his alleged involvement in the 1MDB (1 Malaysian Development Berhad) scandal and has pleaded not guilty. A day after the electoral defeat, Najib handed the party's leadership to his deputy Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. Technically, Ahmad Zahid was not formally the president but played a caretaker role until party elections were carried out on 30 June 2018.

Several recent episodes revealed cracks within the party. On 16 July 2018, during the swearing-in ceremony to Parliament for newly elected lawmakers, UMNO leaders, led by Zahid Hamidi and Najib Razak, initiated a walkout in protest against the way the PH government had nominated the Speaker. Mohamad Ariff Yusof—a retired judge—was named Speaker but his nomination did not meet the required 14-day notice. PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) MPs joined the show of disagreement, but UMNO MPs Khairy Jamaluddin (former Minister of Youth and Sports), and Anifah Aman (former Foreign

Minister) refused to follow suit. Both expressed dissent, and thought the walkout unnecessary.²

This show of disunity was further exacerbated during the party's internal elections.³ The election was historic because it was the first time since 1987 that the party's presidency and deputy presidency were contested. In 1987, then Prime Minister Mahathir and Ghaffar Baba Deputy Prime Minister (Team A) were challenged by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and former deputy Prime Minister to Mahathir, Musa Hitam (Team B).⁴ Mahathir won by a meagre 43 votes, in a controversial and divisive contest.

In the 2018 UMNO elections, the UMNO president post witnessed a three-cornered fight between Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Khairy Jamaluddin and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah— notably, the incumbent, the youth wing leader, and a veteran. Khairy championed radical moves to revamp Umno, even suggesting that the party accept non-Malays as members.⁵ Razaleigh, on the other hand, urged the party to remove leaders who sought to benefit themselves, their relatives, and friends.⁶ Ahmad Zahid won by obtaining 93 votes, while Khairy obtained 51 votes and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah received 23 votes.

For the deputy president post, former Chief Minister of Negeri Sembilan (2004-2018) Mohamad Hasan obtained 110 votes, beating Annuar Musa who obtained 47 votes. In GE 14, Mohamad won his parliament seat Rantau unopposed after his challenger, Dr Streram Sinnasamy was stopped from entering the nomination centre on nomination day. Annuar, an MP for Ketereh in Kelantan, was named UMNO secretary-general.⁷ The other three vice-president posts were won by Ismail Sabri Yaacob (former Minister of Rural and regional Development), Mahdzir Khalid (former Minister of Education), and Khaled Nordin (former Chief Minister of Johor).

Ahmad Zahid's victory might not have been due to his popularity, but because of how UMNO is structured. Since 2013, 150,000 delegates from 21,851 party branches and 191 divisions are eligible to elect the top leaders. This figure was a significant expansion of the voter base and was introduced by Najib Razak to make it vote-buying more difficult. To be sure, the power of branch leaders was not reduced by this change. Some delegates claimed that they were given a list of "preferred candidates" as "guide" on whom they should elect. While some branch leaders gave delegates the freedom to choose whoever they wanted, some delegates mainly obeyed their leaders' choices.⁸ Zaidel Baharuddin, an executive secretary of the party argued that UMNO leaders "often resort to placating the divisional leaders who in turn control the branch leaders in their respective divisions so that votes would swing to their favour."⁹ Some UMNO members felt that the voter base should be widened to include ordinary party members.

There was speculation that some UMNO members would defect and join one of the parties in government. In fact, some questioned why Ahmad Zahid had had an audience with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, especially when a fiery dispute had occurred between the two before GE 14, with Ahmad Zahid, then Deputy Prime Minister, claiming that Mahathir was not a pure Malay. There was no proof that the two were negotiating a deal, though recently Mahathir admitted asking Ahmad Zahid to dissolve UMNO.

A few weeks before the general assembly, the party was hit by another blow when some senior members quit the party. Former Minister of International Trade and Industry and MP for Jeli (Kelantan) Mustapa Mohamad, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and MP Kimanis (Sabah) Anifah Aman; and MP for Masjid Tanah (Malacca) Mas Ermieyati left UMNO after long years of service. The reason for their departure remains unknown, although some speculate that it may have to do with UMNO's decision to cooperate closely with PAS. Mustapa explained that his decision to quit was because, "My political principle is that UMNO should be inclusive, moderate and a party that takes the middle path. The direction taken by UMNO now no longer aligns with my political principles."¹⁰ Recently, Mahathir's party PBBM (Malaysian United Indigenous Party) announced that Mustapa has joined its ranks.

To reverse perceptions of disunity, UMNO came up with a shadow cabinet, which included even some of Ahmad Zahid's rivals. Khairy, for instance, was named shadow minister for finance, the position shared with Sabahan Joseph Kurup. Razaleigh was named shadow minister in the Prime Minister's Office. Annuar Ariffin was named Rural Development Shadow Minister, Ismail Sabri in the Prime Minister's Office; and Madzhir Khalid took the Education portfolio. However, UMNO deputy president Mohamad Hasan was not given any shadow portfolio, while Hishammuddin Hussein, who did not take up any leadership positions in Umno, would oversee the defence portfolio.

UMNO-PAS UNITY AS A SOURCE OF TENSION

Not all UMNO members were pleased with the suggestion that the party would perform better if it worked closely with PAS. To be sure, the proposal of a unity government between UMNO and PAS had surfaced before GE14. During the UMNO general assemblies in 2016 and 2017, Najib was unequivocally reaching out to PAS, a departure from the evident stance of his predecessors. For instance, he spoke about supporting PAS' decision to upgrade Act 355, an amendment that, if passed by parliament, would have meant increased maximum sentences for shariah offences—fines would go up to RM 100,000 (S\$31,590), caning to 100 strokes, and imprisonment to 30 years from the current RM 5,000 (S\$1,600) fine, 6 strokes of the cane, and three years' imprisonment. Najib and PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang shared the same stage on many occasions, the most significant one being in a protest against the Myanmar government over its handling of the Rohingya crisis.

As it turned out, UMNO and PAS contested separately in GE 14. UMNO continued heading the BN coalition and PAS formed a third coalition called Gagasan Sejahtera (Ideas of Prosperity) with smaller Malay/Muslim parties. UMNO, for various reasons, lost control over the federal government for the first time, and over several more states as well. PAS retained Kelantan with two more parliament seats, and captured Terengganu. In Kelantan, PAS won 9 out of 14 parliament seats and 37 out of the 45 state seats. In Terengganu, it won 6 parliament seats to UMNO's 2 seats, and 22 state seats to UMNO's 10 seats.

A formal pact was nevertheless reached between UMNO and PAS in two by-elections after GE 14, for the state seats of Sungai Kandis and Seri Setia in Selangor. The two parties agreed that UMNO would make way for PAS in Seri Setia, and PAS would reciprocate by making way for UMNO to contest in Sungai Kandis. In the Sungai Kandis elections, PH candidate

Zawawi Ahmad Mughni won the seat in a three-cornered fight against UMNO and an independent candidate. Zawawi obtained 15,427 votes (61.4 percent) while UMNO's Lokman Noor Adam obtained 9,585 votes (38.2 percent). Independent candidate K Murthy obtained 97 votes. In GE 14, PH won 55.6 percent; BN 26.9 percent, PAS 17.4 percent, and PRM 0.18 percent. Overall, PH's percentage of votes increased by 5.8 percent while BN gained 11.57 percent. PAS' decision not to contest in the Sungai Kandis by-election did not therefore lead to a BN victory. For the Seri Setia by-election seat, PH's Halimey Abu Bakar beat PAS candidate Halimah Ali in a two-cornered fight. PH obtained 58.6 percent of the votes, down from the 66.6 percent it won in GE 14, in which UMNO obtained 22.5 percent and PAS won 10.4 percent. Comparing these two by-elections, PAS performed better in reducing PH's margin of victory in GE 14. One can tentatively conclude that UMNO-PAS cooperation tends to benefit PAS more than it does UMNO.

Signs that UMNO and PAS may yet form an official alliance was clear when Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was pictured on stage with Abdul Hadi Awang during the PAS general assembly this year. While Abdul Hadi did not attend the UMNO general assembly, senior PAS leaders did, including PAS deputy president Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man, Youth chief Khalil Abdul Hadi (the son of PAS president), Women's Wing chief Dr Nuridah Mohd Salleh came.

2018 ASSEMBLY: A MORE FRAGMENTED UMNO?

As in previous years, the UMNO general assembly is a time for the party to demonstrate unity. More than just an occasion to discuss the party's direction, the meeting has always been a show-and-tell of the party's dominance in Malaysian politics. It would receive airtime from mainstream media RTM (Malaysian Radio and Television). In the past, the president's opening and closing addresses were broadcasted live. However, the 2018 assembly was a non-event, and the party had to rely more on social media and post-event reporting in newspapers.

Despite having elected a new president—Ahmad Zahid—the essence and direction of the 2018 UMNO assembly did not depart much from those of previous years. Last year, Najib used the occasion to shore up support for his leadership, to call for party unity, and to play up its Islamic credentials. This time, Ahmad Zahid warned members not to be overly critical of the party leadership, though he welcomed dissenting voices. His speech was also peppered with Malay idioms that called for more discipline. For example, he warned members not to “puncture the ship with the intention of making it sink” (*asyik tebuk kapal nak bagi bocor*). He also urged members not to air differences publicly: “what happens behind the curtains must not be revealed in public” (*hal dalam kelambu diceritakan di tepi jalan*).

In all, he raised 7 thrusts which UMNO should focus on, and tabled 21 recommendations for the UMNO supreme council to endorse in the name of reviving the party.¹¹ The seven broad areas included faith and trust; political exploitation; empowerment; special rights [for Sabah and Sarawak]; political alliances; government in-waiting; and sacrifice. Generally, the recommendations supporting these broad goals are substantive, reflecting deep thinking and concrete measures. For instance, on the aspect of being a government in waiting, Ahmad Zahid proposed the creation of four clusters within the shadow cabinet to engage with the government; the first cluster being for engagement with the Prime Minister's Office, law,

manpower, and security; the second being for finance, economy and industry; the third being for education, social and culture; and the fourth being for infrastructure, technology and health.

Divisions within the party was clearly evident when vice-president Ismail Sabri Yaakob advised Khairy to “return” to the team.¹² Khairy criticised Ahmad Zahid’s opening speech as unclear and ambiguous. Khairy also claimed that Ahmad Zahid kept on changing his mind about forming a unity government with PH. Khairy alleged that the president did not set the record straight whether UMNO wants to be an opposition party, form a unity government with PAS and other parties in the PH government. He also urged that the president’s speech must resonate at the grassroots level.¹³

During the assembly, delegates were critical of members who left the party after the election defeat. Delegates were upset especially since it was the UMNO’s party machinery that helped MPs who had departed to their victories in the last elections.¹⁴ He also pointed out that UMNO would take necessary legal action to recover assets withheld illegally from the party. This was the case when individuals appointed as trustees to oversee the party’s assets refused to return them to the party. However, Tengku Razaleigh believed it would be a challenge for the party to take legal action given that similar attempts made earlier in Penang and had been unsuccessful.¹⁵

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES OF UMNO REVIVAL

Despite the party president taking some concrete measures to revive UMNO, issues pertaining to corruption remained the elephant in the auditorium. A few days after the Assembly, Ahmad Zahid was slapped with 45 charges relating to criminal breach of trust bribery and laundering. If Ahmad Zahid is found guilty, UMNO will face another leadership crisis. It remains puzzling why the issue of corruption was not seriously debated at the Assembly. One possibility is that delegates wanted to avoid speaking about it in front of Najib, who was one of the attendees, and Ahmad Zahid, who was already being investigated when the assembly was proceeding. Nonetheless, the corruption issue is a hard pill UMNO will have to swallow if it wants to move forward.

Another issue that remains unclear is the issue of an UMNO alliance with PAS, which is a contentious one that had already apparently led to senior leaders Mustapa Mohamad and Anifah Aman leaving the party. From his speech, Ahmad Zahid indicated his intolerance of liberalism (especially towards LGBT), diversity (towards Shiism) and attitudes he described as promoting hedonism. In this respect, Ahmad Zahid may move UMNO further right, alienating the progressives, non-Muslims and non-Malays further. That may be a prerequisite for collaboration with PAS. Nevertheless, the bigger impact of UMNO-PAS unity will be on the position of the non-Malay parties in BN, both the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). UMNO-PAS unity will only solidify conservative Malay-Muslim unity.

It is unlikely that UMNO will be revived through establishing a formal alliance with PAS. Recent trends, as in the Sungai Kandis and Seri Setia by-elections, have showed that such pacts benefit PAS more than UMNO. Yet, it is too early to tell how this joining of forces will

impact PAS. In the 1974 elections, PAS joined the BN only to be wiped out in the 1978 elections, when it finally lost control of Kelantan.

Will UMNO revisit its founding president's suggestion given back in the 1950s for the party to be multiracial? If applied to today's context, it means disbanding the BN alliance of ethnic parties. Judging from how the 2018 UMNO general assembly proceeded, this is not likely to happen in the near future. Ahmad Zahid has indicated that the BN model is here to stay, and in his opening speech, maintained that "UMNO will remain the party for Malays and Bumiputeras" and defended Article 153 of the Constitution which stresses Malay dominance.¹⁶ Nevertheless, how this will be done with PAS on board remains a tricky question in the years to come, considering that for any coalition to become the government of Malaysia, support from non-Malays is key.

¹ Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, "PAU 2018: UMNO Bangkit-Ucapan Dasar Presiden Umno," <https://www.umno-online.my/2018/09/29/pau-2018-umno-bangkit-ucapan-dasar-presiden-umno/> 29 September 2018.

² Trinna Leong, "New KL Parliament's first sitting starts with a brief walkout," *Straits Times*, 17 July 2018.

³ These party elections was deferred many times. Though the deferment of the elections did not meet the general guidelines ascertained for political parties in the country, the Registrar of Societies (RoS) supported the deferment.

⁴ Unlike the presidency and vice-presidency positions, UMNO has three vice-president positions and these are contested regularly.

⁵ "Khairy tak tolak keahlian UMNO untuk semua kaum," Malaysiakini 15 May 2018, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/424968>

⁶ Khairul Azran Hussin, "Singkirkan petualang dalam UMNO-Tengku Razaleigh," Berita Harian, 22 June 2018, <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/politik/2018/06/440309/singkirkan-petualang-dalam-umno-tengku-razaleigh>

⁷ After the elections, he was critical of UMNO members who continued to defend Najib. He revealed that he was one of the UMNO and Supreme Council members who urged Najib to explain the RM2.6 billion donation found in the former Prime Minister's bank account. Malaysiakini, "Annuar Musa: I reprimanded Najib on RM2.6b," 29 June 2018. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/431854>

⁸ Tasnim Lokman, "Is Umno's 'menu' for use or abuse?" *The New Straits Times*, 30 June 2018.

⁹ Tarrence Tan, "UMNO told to reform, recruit more members with full-time jobs," *The Star* online, 30 May 2018.

¹⁰ Trinna Leong, "Ex-minister Mustapa Mohamed quits Umno," *Straits Times*, 19 September 2018.

¹¹ *Utusan Malaysia*, "Penegasan Zahid" 1 October 2018.

¹² *Utusan Malaysia*, "Khairy dinasihati kembali dalma pasukan," 1 October 2018.

¹³ *Berita Harian*, "Tok Mat pertikai tindakan Khairy kritik ucapan Presiden," 1 October 2018.

¹⁴ *Berita Harian*, "Medan kutuk pemimpin tak setia," 1 October 2018.

¹⁵ "Reaksi ucapan dasar Presiden UMNO Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi," Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8y67WsI888> (Date accessed: 12 October 2018).

¹⁶ Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, "PAU 2018: UMNO Bangkit-Ucapan Dasar Presiden Umno," <https://www.umno-online.my/2018/09/29/pau-2018-umno-bangkit-ucapan-dasar-presiden-umno/> 29 September 2018.

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