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## **Najib's Conviction: What Does It Mean for Muhyiddin?**

*By Prashant Waikar*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has been sentenced to 12 years in jail for crimes relating to the 1MDB-linked SRC International. Will this strain UMNO's relations with Muhyiddin Yassin to a breaking point, or is Muhyiddin's premiership still secure?*

### **COMMENTARY**

FORMER MALAYSIAN prime minister Najib Razak has been slapped with a 12-year jail sentence and an RM210 million (S\$68 million) fine for abuse of power, money laundering, and criminal breach of trust. This first case relates to his involvement with the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) subsidiary, SRC International, from which Najib was charged with pocketing RM42 million (S\$13.6 million).

Since the Muhyiddin Yassin administration's slim majority – just four seats more than the opposition – there have been repeated suggestions that his premiership is shaky, subject to the whims of his biggest partner in government – UMNO. For some time now, UMNO leaders have been threatening to trigger a collapse of the Muhyiddin-led government, informally called Perikatan Nasional (PN), by withdrawing from it. With the conviction of Najib, will UMNO now abandon the government in displeasure?

### **Misplaced Concerns; Split in UMNO**

Prior to the verdict, some observers, taking their cues from the Riza Aziz and Musa Aman cases, had suggested that the assortment of corruption charges levelled at Najib and other UMNO leaders might be rolled back as a form of appeasement. But Najib's conviction showed that the pre-trial concerns were misplaced.

Disgruntled UMNO leaders may claim that they have sufficient clout to withdraw from the government. In truth, however, Muhyiddin has been gradually consolidating his position since coming to power in February. The outcome of Najib's first of five trials relating to the 1MDB scandal which has set back Muhyiddin's political opponents lends credence to this perspective.

There is little doubt that Najib is a popular figure in UMNO. He has successfully recast his image since losing the 2018 general election – from being out-of-touch to “a man of the people”. Najib is also well-resourced and has maintained a base of support among UMNO division chiefs and some Supreme Council members.

However, there exists a split among UMNO leaders and parliamentarians – especially where it relates to Najib. The clearest clues come from their reactions to the conviction.

### **Reactions to Najib's Conviction**

After the sentencing, Minister of Science, Technology, and Innovation Khairy Jamaluddin issued a strong statement urging UMNO to move on from the Najib episode, rejuvenate itself, and not be dragged down by the scandal. Khairy has consistently been critical of Najib since the downfall of Barisan Nasional (BN) in 2018.

More sympathetic have been the UMNO Youth Chief Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, Pahang Menteri Besar (chief minister) Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail, and Foreign Affairs Minister Hishammuddin Hussein. At the same time, they were careful to acknowledge the legitimacy of the court's verdict.

Prominent UMNO figures will generally not attack the judicial process now that they are part of the government. However, the cautious undertone of their statements is noteworthy. They may not wish to burn bridges with Najib just yet – especially if they can still benefit from his patronage. But theirs is hardly a ringing endorsement of the former PM either.

Contrast this with the statement of another UMNO veteran, Mohd Puad Zarkashi, who attacked the court's ruling as an act of vengeance by Muhyiddin. Puad is an UMNO Supreme Council Member and Najib's close associate. UMNO figures such as Puad may be steadfast Najib loyalists. But expect many to take the trial's outcome as a cue to reconsider their factional interests.

### **Muhyiddin's Premiership Still Secure?**

Splits in UMNO tend to reflect differences in position on key internal issues. Since Najib was a determining factor in UMNO's fall, the divisions reflect schisms on matters concerning leadership and the party's future. Some, such as Khairy, adopt obvious positions of strategic distancing, while others, such as Hishammuddin, are more subtle.

Party President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi has firmly backed Najib. Responding to the conviction, Zahid has stated that UMNO will not join PN, but nevertheless will remain in government. PN is not a registered coalition, but a convenient shorthand to label

the group of parties that have come together to topple the previous Pakatan Harapan government in March 2020.

Most observers routinely overlook this. The question of joining or withdrawing from 'PN' is therefore moot. If anything, Zahid's statement reaffirms the status quo arrangement, for UMNO still wishes to be in government.

It is quite unlikely that Zahid is in a position to unilaterally move the party one way or another. The outcome of the SRC International trial is drawing open the curtains that hide UMNO's factional politics.

While enticing opposition MPs to crossover would strengthen the government's weak majority – just 113 MPs in a house of 222 support PN, Muhyiddin benefits as much from a divided UMNO.

Those in UMNO who are furious with the verdict, fearful of receiving similar convictions, and sidelined from government positions may think the party should abandon PN. But those made ministers, deputy ministers, and government-linked companies (GLCs) chairmen would be unwilling to forgo their immediate interests.

### **Prospects for Muhyiddin**

UMNO leaders who aspire to a political future beyond the current crop of bigwigs may be reluctant to acquiesce to the faction clamouring for a withdrawal from PN. The fact that PAS – UMNO's ally in the PN coalition – has been quite forthcoming with its commitments to Muhyiddin also diminishes the leverage that 'PN-exiters' may have.

In the short term, Muhyiddin will look to maintain the status quo. His best option may be to create conditions which encourage parties from both sides to acquiesce to his remaining prime minister for the full term of this parliament until 2023.

Since negotiating for seat allocations with UMNO and PAS is likely to remain tough, it is not in his interest to allow a dissolution of parliament. With over 30 years of experience in UMNO politics and government, Muhyiddin could be well placed to leverage the powers of incumbency, exploit UMNO's factionalism, and mitigate threats to his vulnerable position.

Of course, Najib will spend the next year or more appealing the conviction. Should he succeed, Najib could move to reestablish himself in UMNO – leading to very different power dynamics in PN.

However, Najib faces four more 1MDB-related trials, while his allies have their own court cases to deal with. With UMNO bogged down by these issues, Muhyiddin may have the upper hand for the foreseeable future.

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