



Malaysia

Power struggle in ruling coalition party likely to determine timing of snap general election in 2021

OPERATIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONAL POLITICAL STABILITY

COVID-19

Federal territories minister Annuar Musa on 28 January said that a snap general election is likely to be called this year.

The outcome of a factional battle within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO; ruling coalition member) will be a major factor determining the timing of a snap election in 2021.

UMNO president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who wants an election as soon as possible, currently has the upper hand but there are growing signs of an internal revolt against him.

If Zahid is replaced by deputy party president Mohamad Hasan, the election is less likely to occur [until COVID-19 is under control](#) and the state of emergency is lifted.

A scenario involving Hasan as UMNO president would bolster chances of the ruling coalition recapturing federal power in the election and ensure general policy continuity, including pro-foreign investment rules.

Factions at war

UMNO is split into two factions. The first, led by Zahid and former prime minister Najib Razak (2009-18), wants to break the party's relationship with Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM; ruling coalition member). The second, led by UMNO leaders holding cabinet positions – such as Annuar and foreign minister Hishammuddin Hussein – wants to maintain co-operation with the PPBM.

Zahid has been trying to instigate UMNO's withdrawal from the ruling coalition to deprive Muhyiddin of a parliamentary majority and trigger a snap election. He was hoping that the party's delegates at the annual general assembly (originally scheduled for 31 January) would vote in favour of breaking UMNO's ties with the PPBM. However, the imposition of the Movement Control Order 2.0 (MCO 2.0; lockdown, currently slated to last until 4 February) across [almost every state](#) in the country, and nationwide [state of emergency](#) (until 1 August) has forced UMNO to postpone the general assembly. Elections also cannot be held during the state of emergency.

Rumblings beneath the surface

Zahid's leadership of UMNO is also not assured amid signs of an internal revolt, though he still has the upper hand. Several youth and division chiefs have urged Zahid to retire, citing his lack of direction for the party and corruption charges. Senior UMNO leaders, including those in the UMNO Supreme Council (the party's main decision-making body), have not echoed such demands and a few have defended Zahid. Nevertheless, his position may weaken, particularly if he is found guilty of those corruption charges following a trial due to begin on 22 February. A guilty verdict would increase the risk of UMNO leaders withdrawing support for Zahid and transferring their allegiances to deputy president Mohamad.

Mohamad has continued to defend Zahid but his recent remarks about the PPBM suggest he may be more amenable to maintaining UMNO's ties with the PPBM. Mohamad in early January said UMNO should prioritise building up its own strength without necessarily rejecting co-operation with the PPBM for the next general election. The anti-Zahid faction in UMNO is therefore likely to support Mohamad to replace Zahid, given UMNO's history of leadership succession and respect for hierarchy.

If the revolt against Zahid gains ground in the coming months and leads to his ousting, a Mohamad-led UMNO would be less likely to push for an imminent election. Mohamad's ascension within UMNO would also strengthen the likelihood of the ruling coalition remaining intact and winning an election later in the year, thereby ensuring general policy continuity and receptivity to foreign investment.

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