

UMNO's "Grand Collaboration": Unity, Survival, or Political Recycling?

News:

The delayed 2025 United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) General Assembly concluded last week with renewed attention on the party's political future following the announcement of a proposed *Grand Collaboration* by its President, Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. The initiative was presented as an effort to unite Malay and Islamic political forces within Malaysia, while explicitly maintaining support for the current unity government led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. However, the proposal has generated debate due to its timing, emerging amid declining Malay support for UMNO and as the country approaches its 16th General Election (GE16).

Comment:

At face value, calls for Malay–Islamic unity resonate strongly within Malaysia's political landscape, where prolonged fragmentation has weakened communal influence and intensified political vulnerability. Unity, in principle, is widely viewed as a necessary corrective to political division. Yet the central issue lies not in the appeal of unity itself, but in the framework, intent, and objectives underpinning such initiatives.

Current political realities indicate that UMNO is facing a significant erosion of support among Malay voters, with estimates placing backing at approximately 28 per cent—an insufficient base for the party to contest GE16 independently. This decline is widely associated with perceived failures to safeguard Malay economic interests, compromises on religious and educational matters, and continued political cooperation with the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which remains controversial among many Malay constituents. Within this context, the proposed Grand Collaboration is widely interpreted less as a principled unification effort and more as a mechanism for political survival.

The situation is further complicated by indications that the proposal has been communicated to, and is broadly accepted by, the leadership of the unity government. This alignment suggests that the initiative may also serve to stabilise the current governing coalition. Although UMNO leadership has denied political motives, the reality remains that such a collaboration would likely reinforce UMNO's parliamentary position while indirectly strengthening the ruling alliance.

Malaysia's political history demonstrates that Malay–Islamic unity initiatives are far from new. Previous efforts—introduced under varying names and alliances—have repeatedly mobilised religious and ethnic narratives to consolidate support. While these initiatives often generate early enthusiasm, they have consistently failed to deliver structural change. Once political power is secured, Islamic principles are frequently sidelined in favour of personal interests, entrenching corruption, abuse of authority, and political opportunism. These patterns persist largely because the prevailing political system permits and sustains them.

Genuine unity, however, is not founded on ethnicity, nationalism, or short-term political expediency. Islam advocates unity grounded in shared faith, transcending race, language, and geography. Such comprehensive unity requires the full implementation of Islamic principles within governance, under an overarching Khilafah (Caliphate) – the political institution capable of safeguarding collective interests. Without systemic transformation, repeated calls for unity will continue to echo—only to fade into irrelevance once again.

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