**Najib risks political future with civil liberty pledge**
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ANALYSIS Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's pledge to speed up civil liberty reforms to attract middle-class voters could hurt his chances in general elections expected early next year by alienating conservatives.

Najib said in a televised address yesterday the Internal Security Act (ISA), enacted in 1960, and Emergency Ordinance, both of which allow for indefinite detention without trial, would be repealed and replaced by two news laws for use mainly against suspected militants.

By repealing or changing the security laws, which critics say have stifled freedom of expression, Najib faces resistance from influential conservatives who want a tougher stance against political dissidents.

But any failure to deliver on those pledges is likely to anger an electorate, already upset with the glacial pace of reforms, clouding the outlook for Najib's ruling coalition at the ballot box.

“If reform resistance emerges and grows or if there is no substantive change, then his chances of achieving his aim (of securing a strong election win) becomes less certain,” said Ibrahim Suffian, director of Merdeka Centre, an independent opinion polling outfit.

Najib has promised political and economic reforms in 2008 in a bid to reverse his ruling coalition's record losses in a general election. He will need to deliver on those pledges to stay firmly in power.

As part of his pledges yesterday, a strict media law will also be changed to allow greater media freedom and other legislation restricting civil liberties would be reviews.

**Emerging pushback**

Since taking office, Najib has delayed economic reforms, including the introduction of a promised goods and services tax.

He has slowed down on a fuel subsidy rollback to avoid sparking anger by voters hit by rising prices.

A big street protest in July, attended by young members of the middle class angered over the slow pace of reforms, also exposed a groundswell of anger that has sent Najib's approval ratings to 56 percent last month from 72 percent in May last year.

Najib has softened his stance on the reform of a controversial pro-ethnic majority Malay economic policy amid resistance by conservative groups who enjoy backing from some within his own party.

One of the most influential, Perkasa, has begun to question his promised political reforms. That could lead to a pushback and block their implementation by the elections.

“Malaysian politics is now in havoc and he suddenly withdraws the ISA... At the moment, I see it is more aimed to be populist rather than because of national security,” said Ibrahim Ali, head of Perkasa.

The group has in the past called for the laws to be retained for use against political dissidents, and said it would study the two new security laws Najib proposed before making an official stand.

“This move is a gamble by Najib and his best chances in turning it into a success depends on how well he can convince the hard liners and conservatives in his party that this will improve their electability,” said the

Merdeka Centre's Ibrahim.

**Voter backlash**

Failure to implement the changes substantively ahead of polls could lead to the kind of a voter backlash that befell Najib's predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

pak lah abdullah ahmad badawi putrajaya malaysiaAbdullah led the ruling coalition to a historic 90 percent sweep of the country's parliamentary seats in a 2004 general election on a pledge of reforms including strengthening the independence of institutions like the judiciary and police.

But he was severely punished by voters in 2008 after failing to deliver on his reform promises in the face of strong resistance by the ruling party, and was forced into early retirement the following year.

“I wonder how many of those who were so captured by Abdullah's promises feel similarly giddy after hearing the promises made by Najib,” said political analyst Ong Kian Ming who teaches at UCSI University in Kuala Lumpur.

“If you answer in the affirmative, I advise you to take a sober look at Abdullah's record and then re-examine Najib's promises,” said Ong.

- Reuters

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