

Political winds force M'sian democratic reforms

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ANALYSIS Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's vow to move away from Malaysia's authoritarian past is an acknowledgement of growing public pressure for real democracy that many believe will now become irresistible.

Muslim-majority Malaysia has been dominated for five decades by the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), which has delivered strong growth and political stability but kept a tight lid on the volatile mix of races and religions.

In recent times though, impatience with Umno dominance, corruption, and 1970s-era policies that give preferential treatment to ethnic Malays and other indigenous groups, have put the government under pressure as never before.

Najib, who is expected to call snap elections within months, said last week he would replace a dreaded law allowing detention without trial, and other measures seen as tools of Umno oppression, to achieve a "modern, mature" democracy.

More openness is inevitable, said Karim Raslan, a Malaysian commentator on social and political issues, but the path ahead will be rocky with resistance from an entrenched old guard.

"We are no longer a 'strongman democracy'. However, we're still feeling our way forward. We don't know either how far or how fast we'll be able to open up," he said.

Signs of change are everywhere. A once-insignificant opposition has gained in influence, making major inroads in 2008 national polls, and has designs on power.

The Internet is alive with popular news portals highly critical of the government - print and broadcast media are Umno-controlled - and Facebook and Twitter campaigns have had some success in blocking government moves.

Najib's unusually bold step was aimed at salvaging re-election hopes dented in part by the slow pace of political change and outrage over the crushing of a July rally in the capital Kuala Lumpur calling for election reform.

But the premier gave few details, and far-reaching reform will be fought fiercely by Malay conservatives who have a major influence on the government which has been run by an Umno-led coalition since independence in 1957.

"You can change all the laws you want but if you don't change the institutions that execute them - the police and the government structure - what changes?" said leading analyst Bridget Welsh from Singapore Management University.

In thrall to Umno

Malaysia's court system and police are widely considered in thrall to Umno, and losing control over them raises the spectre of impartial agencies probing alleged Umno wrongdoing.

A powerful security apparatus would also be loathe to loosen broad powers it sees as essential to ensure harmony among a population that includes majority Muslim Malays and Chinese and Indian minorities, and which has seen racial violence in the past.

Any threat to the legally enshrined privileges for 'bumiputra' - or 'sons of the soil' - will be hotly contested.

They hand Malays and other indigenous people advantages in politics and the economy through a range of benefits including university slots, and government jobs and contracts.

But even growing numbers of Malays complain the system is abused by a corrupt elite seeking profit and increased power.

“The forces in power need these things in order to survive. For those at the top, that is their gravy train. It is a predatory system fed by corruption and it is very endemic,” said Welsh (right).

Najib will need to win over powerful hardliners in his party, a tough task given that his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi faced severe Umno blowback after he introduced anti-graft reforms.

But the opposition is already calling for further loosening gestures, and failure to deliver substantive change could see Najib and Umno severely punished by voters, said Ibrahim Suffian, director of the Merdeka Centre, Malaysia’s leading polling firm.

“He has opened the bottle and the genie will come out. If he decides to close the bottle or delay, there is going to be a backlash,” he said.

But few believe that the winds of change that blew over regimes in the “Arab Spring” uprisings in fellow Muslim countries can be completely blocked here.

“When it does happen, (Najib's reforms) will set in train a whole series of other changes - a chain reaction that will inevitably make Malaysian society more open and dynamic,” said Karim.

“(Malaysia will) be more difficult to manage, but that's the direction we're moving in.”

- AFP