

PM: No polls until promised reforms are delivered
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Prime Minister Najib Razak said he hopes to call elections soon, a report yesterday said, as speculation over the polls date heats up following the court acquittal of Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim.

But in an interview with Dow Jones Newswires, reported by AFP, Najib said he would not call a general election until he had delivered on his recent promise to introduce democratic reforms.

Najib must call polls by the early part of 2013, but speculation mounted this week that he may call them within months, before the opposition is able to organise itself, following their leader Anwar Ibrahim's court victory on Monday.

Anwar, a charismatic former deputy premier ousted in a 1998 power struggle, has fought for years to unseat the former ruling coalition he was once poised to lead and which has governed Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957.

This week, he was cleared of charges he had sodomised a young aide in 2008. Anwar had said the case was intended to remove him from the political scene. Sodomy is punishable with jail in Malaysia.

Following his court reprieve, Anwar vowed to focus on preparations for the next election to ensure that "this corrupt government will be toppled from its pedestals of power."

Meanwhile, in a Wall Street Journal (WSJ) report of the same interview, Najib commented on Anwar's sodomy trial, saying that it was important "that we move forward".

The PM added that it was "unclear" if the prosecution would appeal the verdict, but added that "the acquittal would likely help to convince critics that the government doesn't interfere in politically charged judicial cases".

Feeling the pressure

On the timing of the next GE, AFP quoted Najib as saying, "I hope it will be the right time (for the next election) soon enough, but we still have to deliver on our promises and it's important for people to have the feeling that the reforms we have promised will actually benefit them."

bersih rally July 9 crowd face-off with police 1Facing pressure from an increasingly sophisticated electorate for greater civil liberties and an end to alleged ruling coalition abuses, Najib promised last year to introduce a range of democratic reforms.

They include plans to scrap a colonial-era law allowing detention without trial and other statutes widely viewed as tools to silence government opponents.

Najib is expected to begin introducing replacement laws, which he has promised will be softer, during a parliamentary session opening in March.

His interview comments suggest the polls would not take place at least until after that.

WSJ meanwhile quoted Najib acknowledging that the deteriorating global economic environment, especially the persistent debt crisis in Europe, could complicate his decision on the timing of the GE.

"But so far we are still quite comfortable because our exposure to the EU in terms of total trade is only about nine percent, so we are less vulnerable," WSJ quoted Najib saying.

"But a euro-zone collapse or some other catastrophe there will affect the whole world."

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