

Najib an opportunistic reformer, says author
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By Nigel Aw

Barry Wain, who in 2010 raised red flags at the Home Ministry with his book 'Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times', has described Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak reformer image as a selective one.

The journalist and author, while acknowledging that the current premier had given more substance to his reform agenda compared with his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, he had only instituted changes where the government's position was not endangered, he said.

NONE"Recognising his personal and political limits, Najib has become what I call a tactical or selective reformer, a less charitable description might be an opportunistic reformer," said the Australian, who has lived in Asia for nearly 40 years.

"Skirting some of the areas most in need of reform, he is hoping he can make enough changes around the edges of certain policies, package them attractively and sell them to Malaysia to arrest Umno's slide," Wain told some 30 members of the Foreign Correspondence Club Malaysia (FCCM) at a talk in Kuala Lumpur last night.

'Umno insider no natural reformer'

Despite the recent flurry of legislative reforms, it appeared evident that no attempt has been made to arrest institutional degradation of the police force and judiciary, said Wain, now attached to Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

Among examples he cited was the lack of accountability in the death of Teoh Beng Hock, the conviction of two police officers without known motive for the murder of Mongolia Altantuya Sharibu and Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim's second sodomy trial.

NONE"No serious analyst in Malaysia or abroad would believe that Anwar's prosecution and trial was free of political influence," said the keen observer of Malaysian politics.

The premier, Wain (left) added, had not signalled intention to reform the internal mechanics of Umno where corruption was most endemic and his proposed reforms to political financing was likely to circumvent money politics within Umno.

"Should Najib attempt to seriously curb the flow of patronage within the ruling party, he would probably follow Abdullah out the door," he said.

Before the Najib's reform push to soften the government's image, his involvement in the the Perak coup had not not helped his reputation as a natural reformist, he added.

"Throughout Najib's career, he has been cautious and pragmatic, he has never questioned Malaysia's ethnic-based political system nor has he proposed significant innovation, not even during his direct ministerial responsibilities.

"It is difficult to define what he stands for... Najib is not only part of the system, one of his closest associates said, he trusts the system, he is the system," said Wain.

NONEOn the economic reform front, he said, there also appeared to be an absent of genuine change.

"I remember the first time he announced the New Economic Model and said we'll have a world-class education system, you know education in Malaysia is a mess, if you got the right policies it would probably take years if not generations to bring about change.

"Yes, he articulates it, it's true we need a world-class education system but there is no follow-up action, sometimes it's just like once he has said it he pretends it is done.

"With any politicians, one must watch what they do and not just what they say, and this is more true with Najib as there is a big gap between what he says and what they have", he added.

Umno's salvation, losing power

Wain added that he had spoken to people who Najib had consulted at the World Bank and they were convinced that the premier was capable of understanding the nation's problems.

"But he is not instinctively bold or audacious nor does he have strong support from the party to make those reforms," he said.

perodua tea time with mahathir function 271011 05The truly outstanding leaders such as former deputy prime ministers Musa Hitam and Anwar Ibrahim and former finance minister Tengku Razalieggh Hamzah, Wain said, had long been ousted by former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad (left) during his 22-year reign.

"Mahathir failed to provide future leadership for Malaysia... his long tenure also blocked the ascendancy of others with leadership potential.

"The most capable people Mahathir got rid of and the people who are left are simply just second or third rung," he said.

Umno in its current form, he added, was unable to reform while it remained in the cusp of power.

NONE"I don't believe Umno will reform itself, I think the best way for Umno is to be defeated and become the opposition and then go and do some serious reform and find new leadership."

Mahathir, Wain said, completed Umno's transition from a humble self-sacrificing party of peasants and schoolteachers to a party of self-serving corporate chieftain and dealmakers.

Even after the longest serving premier handed over power, his legacy lingered on as he had engineered both Abdullah and Najib's premierships.

"The country has been run for more than eight years by fairly weak men put there by Mahathir," he said.

