

Najib weathers protest, may still call early polls
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By Stuart Grudgings & Siva Sithraputhran, Reuters

Prime Minister Abdul Najib Razak appeared today to have weathered the weekend's violent electoral reform protest and may still call elections as early as June.

Running battles between protesters and police in Kuala Lumpur highlighted growing tensions in the South-East Asian nation as it prepares for close elections that could threaten the ruling coalition's 55-year grip on power.

Najib has been seen as leaning towards an election in June - well before his mandate expires next March - but his appeal to middle-class voters may suffer if accusations of police brutality against the around 25,000 protesters gain traction.

However, any political fallout appeared to be limited because protesters were at least partly to blame for the violence, which resulted in hundreds of arrests.

NONEOpposition leader Anwar Ibrahim (right) gave a speech at the rally organised by the independent Bersih movement for election reforms and was accused by some ruling party members and state media of inciting the crowd to break through police barriers.

"That proves that Bersih was hijacked and that Anwar was trying to use it as an election tactic," Nur Jazlan Mohamed, a member of parliament for the ruling United Malays National Organisation, told Reuters.

He said Najib would still be inclined to call elections early, possibly in June.

Najib's approval rating, at a lofty 69 percent in the most recent opinion poll, tumbled last year after a heavy-handed police reaction to a previous Bersih rally for electoral reform.

Since then, he has reached out to middle-class and younger voters by abolishing some colonial-era security laws and pushing limited reforms of an electoral system the opposition says favours his long-ruling National Front coalition.

He is due to announce Malaysia's first national minimum wage for private sector workers tonight - the eve of Labour Day - in another sign that elections are approaching four years after historic opposition gains in 2008.

Government sources told Reuters last month the wage would be set at between RM800 and RM900 per month.

Blame game

The government and state-controlled media were quick to put the blame on protesters for the clashes, which began after some demonstrators broke through police barriers blocking them from entering the city's Merdeka (Independence) Square.

"A Show of Hooliganism," read a headline in the pro-government New Straits Times, which carried pictures of yellow-shirted protesters throwing sticks at police and kicking police cars.

Najib said that police had been the main victims of the violence, but that any allegations of police brutality would be investigated.

Protest leaders and the country's opposition blamed the police for an overzealous response and dozens of witnesses gave evidence of police brutality after officers fired tear gas and chemically-laced water at the unarmed protesters.

NONE "When I walked passed a pack of police officers on both sides, they punched and kicked me," Wong Chin Huat (right), one of the leaders of the Bersih electoral reform movement, told the news website Malaysiakini.

"I fell down. When it looked like I was going to faint, they stopped hitting me."

Anwar, a former deputy prime minister who was acquitted on charges of sodomy in January, denied inciting the protesters, saying the government was trying to deflect the blame for not fully addressing demands for electoral reforms.

Rahul Bajoria, a regional economist with Barclays Capital in Singapore, said the chaotic weekend scenes in Kuala Lumpur were "a short-term negative but not a game-changer" and had not changed his view that elections are likely to be held in June.

"One should not get distracted by what's happening on the political front," he said. "There's enough momentum in the economy both from an investment perspective and from the reforms perspective."

- Reuters

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