

**Analysts: Bersih rally fallout could delay polls**

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**By M Jegathesan, AFP**

Recent police clashes with election-reform protesters in Malaysia have dented premier Najib Abdul Razak's reform credentials and may force him to push back elections, analysts say.

Najib was widely expected to set a June date for what is predicted to be a close battle between his ruling coalition and the opposition led by Anwar Ibrahim, but observers say Saturday's protest may have changed his thinking.

Tens of thousands took to the streets of the capital Kuala Lumpur to demand clean elections, defying government curbs on the rally.

Angry demonstrators broke through barricades and clashed with police, who fired tear gas and chemical-laced water on crowds and arrested 512 people. All have since been released.

Analysts say the events may have tarnished Najib's efforts to win votes by pledging to loosen the long-ruling coalition's authoritarianism.

"(Najib) will definitely push back elections to the latter part of the year or even to next year," said Khoo Kay Peng, an independent political analyst.

NONEKhoo said the curbs on the rally and the police reaction may jeopardise Najib's standing among more liberal voters.

"If Najib holds elections in June, his component parties' and his own party's urban seats will be wiped out," Khoo said.

Activists and the opposition say Malaysia's electoral system is riddled with fraud and pro-government bias, accusing Najib of foot-dragging on reforms. He denies the allegations.

Portraying himself as a reformer, Najib has criss-crossed the country, drumming up support in key constituencies and indicating polls were near.

The ruling coalition he now heads has governed Malaysia since independence in 1957 but had its worst-ever showing in 2008 elections, raising the spectre of the coalition finally losing power.

Najib will face voters at a time of slowing economic growth, a flowering of public debate aided by the Internet, and growing impatience with entrenched corruption and a controversial system of racial preferences for majority Malays.

About 60 percent of Malaysians are Muslim Malays, but there are sizeable ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

Najib was stung by heavy criticism of a police crackdown on a clean-polls rally last year. He has since launched a campaign to repeal some authoritarian laws and pledged to expand civil liberties to regain voter support.

'Saturday's events could undercut reform drive'

But Saturday's events could undercut much of that, said Ibrahim Suffian, director of Merdeka Centre, Malaysia's leading polling organisation.

“For sure, Najib will reconsider holding early polls. Those who attended (the rally) will vote the opposition because of the harsh treatment by the police. They will question Najib’s reform agenda,” he said.

NONEPolice say 25,000 attended the rally while Bersih - the election-reform activist group that organised it - put the figure at 250,000.

“There were Malays, Chinese and Indians of all ages (at the rally). There is an awakening and a lack of fear to express themselves. It is a messy situation for Najib,” Suffian said.

Najib took over in 2009 after the previous year’s election debacle led the dominant United Malays National Organisation (Umno) party to dump his predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Wong Chun Wai, chief editor of the pro-government The Star - Malaysia’s top English daily - said in a column after the protest that elections would be pushed back to at least September.

However, James Chin, a political science lecturer at the Malaysian campus of Australia’s Monash University, said the weekend’s events were a mixed bag for Najib and unlikely to impact the polls timing.

“Urban voters will abandon Najib because of the police action on the protesters. But in rural areas, voters will see Najib as a strong leader who can guarantee stability,” he said.

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