

Caution may be undoing of hesitant reformer Najib

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By Stuart Grudgings, Reuters

Like his father four decades ago, caretaker Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has been handed the perilous task of ushering Malaysia into a new political era at a time of dramatic social change.

azlanAbdul Razak Hussein, Malaysia's second prime minister, responded to traumatic race riots in 1969 by setting up a system of race-based policies favouring majority ethnic Malays that has defined the country's politics ever since.

His son, now 59, has faced the delicate task of trying to dismantle that system and relaxing authoritarian security laws as he seeks to drag his long-ruling party into the modern era.

Four years after becoming prime minister, he is seeking his first popular mandate in Sunday's election on the back of a robust economy but with the Southeast Asian country sharply divided and many voters frustrated at the slow pace of change.

Najib, who took office after the coalition's worst election result in its half-century rule in 2008, has steered an often awkward path between appeasing conservatives in the ethnic Malay ruling party and catering to growing demands for change that have spilled over into street protests.

'Gives us credit for M'sia's success story'

The grey-haired father-of-five believes Malaysia is a misunderstood country.

In an interview with Reuters in March, he repeatedly stressed the complexity of managing a nation whose British colonial history left it with a volatile mix of majority Malays with large minorities of ethnic Indians and economically-dominant ethnic Chinese.

"The very fact that Malaysia is a success story despite the complexities in our society - why don't people give us that credit?" Najib said.

NONETHrust into power after the disastrous 2008 poll, Najib strove to change his reputation as Malaysia's ultimate political insider.

He pledged far-reaching reforms to end years of economic underperformance, the

phasing out of the divisive race-based policies pioneered by his father, and a revival of the government's flagging appeal.

Allies say he is real reformer who needs his own mandate to push ahead with steps to improve economic efficiency and expand freedoms that are unpopular with nationalist "warlords" in his United Malays National Organisation (Umno).

His rule coincides with a period of intense social change in the country of 28 million people as a blossoming civil society and growing middle class clash with tight social, media and political controls that have long cemented Umno's rule.

Najib himself says Malaysia is at a "monumental" period ushering in significant changes.

Critics say Najib's reform rhetoric masks an old-school politician who has done little to rein in corruption within the ethnic Malay elite that has stemmed from the New Economic Policy of privileges for Malays implemented by his father in 1971.

Groomed for the top

Najib was groomed for high office from an early age. He was elected to parliament at 22 and within two years had become the youngest-ever deputy minister.

Accusations of graft have swirled around him, underlining Malaysia's polarised politics and providing almost daily grist for a lively online media.

Opposition politicians said corruption was involved in the 2002 purchase of two French submarines while Najib was defence minister. Najib denied the allegations and there has been no evidence linking him to corruption in the deal.

Two of Najib's bodyguards were convicted of the 2006 murder of a female Mongolian interpreter and model. One of Najib's political aides, who was involved in negotiating the submarine deal, was also charged over the murder but was later acquitted.

The image of a hard-ball schemer portrayed by some opponents could hardly be more at odds with the Najib described by allies.

Although he can appear stiff and aloof in public, allies say the British-educated economist is a mild-mannered gentleman with a wry sense of humour who loves golf and his cats.

Najib has proven unusually media-savvy, attracting 1.5 million Twitter followers and appearing at the occasional rock concert to appeal to youngsters. His personal popularity far outstrips that of his government.

Lost advantage of surprise

But his reputation among many for being careful and deliberate could have been seen by others as indecision as he waited to call an election that had been predicted as early as 2011.

Leaving it to the last minute lost him the advantage of surprise over the three-party opposition alliance led by former Umno grandee Anwar Ibrahim.

Najib began his leadership boldly by pledging to roll back the pro-Malay economic policies that have alienated ethnic Chinese and Indians and stunted investment.

NONEHe was soon forced to backtrack amid opposition from Malay pressure groups, focusing his energy instead on a US\$444 billion Economic Transformation Programmes (ETP) which aims to boost investment and lift Malaysia to rich-country status by 2020.

Following the government's clumsy handling of a protest for electoral reform that ended in violence, Najib announced a slew of security reforms in 2011 that he hailed as the country's biggest security shake-up since independence from Britain.

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