

Is Najib under siege?

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COMMENT The trapeze artistes in circuses are amazing to watch. Just like them Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has tried bending over backwards and forward somersaults to win over the rakyat.

He gave cash handouts, invited fans to watch football with him, turned up at concerts, rode on bicycles and promised more money.

NONEBut Najib (right) also vowed to dismantle some of the authoritarian legacies of his predecessors.

He abolished the Internal Security Act that allowed for detention without trial and revoked a ban that prevented students from being politically active.

But student activist Adam Adli Abdul Halim was arrested and charged under the Sedition Act, which Najib has vowed to lift as part of his reform agenda.

This is exactly where we can conclude the premier fell flat on his face unlike the trapeze artistes who maintain poise and grace throughout their performance. Three more people, an activist and two opposition politicians, have also been detained.

The police have warned that there could be more arrests and several opposition leaders have been hauled up for questioning.

We have analysts speculating that these arrests are a way of discouraging people from turning up at today's rally, which has been called to denounce Barisan Nasional's legitimacy to rule the country.

But could there be more than what meets the eye?

It's interesting that these "sweeping" arrests come barely weeks after the general election where, despite massive fraud and rigging by the ruling coalition, it lost the popular vote and was abandoned by a broad spectrum of society.

Najib handicapped in battle ahead

And it's equally interesting that the crackdown begins as Najib prepares for an even bigger fight to hold on to his presidency in ruling Umno.

Najib did not win a bigger mandate at the polls. In fact he led Barisan Nasional to its worst-ever performance at the elections.

Najib failed to regain the coalition's two third majority in Parliament. And although a self-appointed election director for Selangor, he lost the state by winning far fewer seats than in 2008.

Clearly Najib's political future is hanging by a thread. We have not seen him respond to the arrests.

He has simply gone silent because all Najib cares about now is to keep the various factions within his party happy.

Umno is a corrupt party. Umno members have dizzyingly complex webs of crony connections and business deals. Nepotism and rampant graft is the order of the day.

There are the hardliners in Umno and the remnant lackeys of former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In the wing, spewing venom, Dr M

NONE And most importantly, there is Mahathir (left) himself, spewing venom, loathing any form of dissent and waiting to checkmate Najib.

We also cannot dismiss the fact that Muhyuddin Yassin, the deputy prime minister, has been undermining his boss.

Muhyuddin was instrumental in booting out previous premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi after his shocking performance at the polls in 2008.

So Najib is a prime minister under siege. He does not have his own mandate and is powerless to initiate reforms.

And therefore, he has to do the bidding of the real powers in Umno to satisfy the corrupt, the orthodox and Mahathir. It means we will see more arrests. This is the grim reality.

As I write this, I received a text informing me that PKR's Tian Chua, PAS' Tamrin Ghafar and activist Haris Ibrahim have been released as the applications for remand by the police were thrown out. This is indeed good news.

But a fellow colleague and Parliamentarian will be charged on Monday under the Peaceful Assembly Act for a post-election rally.

Therefore it's clear that until Najib feels his position within Umno is entrenched and prominent leaders in his party are not threatened about losing power in the up-coming Umno polls, the witch hunt would continue.

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