

PM's new move reversal of no-NEP stand?

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By Stuart Grudgings, Reuters

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak will announce measures this week to boost the economic role of majority ethnic Malays, official media reported on Wednesday, signalling a reversal of earlier pledges to roll back affirmative action (NEP) policies.

The announcement, due on Saturday, comes as Najib faces a ruling party leadership contest next month. It also follows an election in May in which his coalition, in power since independence from Britain in 1957, was overwhelmingly rejected by minority ethnic Chinese voters.

pm open house 190812 najibThe initiatives will cover equity ownership, business, "human capital" and social and economic development, the state-controlled New Straits Times cited senior officials as saying.

He will also announce steps, the report said, to strengthen state institutions that promote the economic role of Malays, also known as "bumiputeras".

Abdul Wahid Omar, a minister in the Prime Minister's Department, was quoted as saying there could also be steps to create more opportunities for Malays in the private sector and to boost their ownership of commercial property.

"A recurring issue is the lack of employment opportunities for bumiputeras in the private sector, especially at the executive level," he was quoted as saying.

Affirmative action privileges were put in place to improve the lot of Malays, who make up around 60 percent of the 28 million population, are historically poorer and traditionally live in rural areas.

Minority ethnic Chinese, about a quarter of the population, are wealthier and still dominate business and the economy.

After he took over the country's top job in 2009, Najib cast himself as a moderniser who would roll back the privileges that have stunted the Southeast Asian country's competitiveness and alienated minorities.

He has also pledged to make government assistance more based on needs than on race.

But those plans have largely failed to advance due to stiff resistance from within the ruling, ethnic Malay United Malays National Organisation (Umno).

NONENajib was further weakened by May's election in which the ruling coalition lost the popular vote and saw its parliamentary majority shrink.

The result, contested by the opposition, exposed a deepening divide between Malays and ethnic Chinese and was seen as leaving Najib more dependent on support from Umno traditionalists, such as influential former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad (right).

For four decades, ethnic Malays have benefitted from race-based policies ranging from quotas for university admissions to preferential entry to the civil service and guaranteed minimum levels of business ownership.

Critics say the policy has mostly benefitted wealthy, well-connected Malays more than the poor majority, while also contributing to a massive "brain drain" of ethnic Chinese who leave Malaysia to seek opportunities elsewhere.

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