

PM reassures non-bumis amid race-based measures

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By Nigel Aw

Despite the high profile policy announcement today exclusively for the Malay and bumiputera community, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak (below) was quick to give his reassurance that the interests of other communities will not be eroded.

"Do not misunderstand the Malay economic empowerment.

"NONEThis initiative is not at the expense of or taking away the rights of any other people...There is no prejudice against other races," Najib said at the end of his announcement.

Today's event, at the exclusively bumiputera Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in Shah Alam, appeared tailored to boost the premier's Malay credentials ahead of the Umno leadership elections.

In an apparent move to remind his party's support base that Umno remains the champion of the Malays, almost the entire Umno rank and file were in attendance at the carefully planned event.

Najib, flanked by his deputy Muhyiddin Yassin, was accompanied by almost his entire cabinet line-up and several menteri besar who are office bearers in Umno.

He thanked the Malay and bumiputera communities for their support in the last general election before announcing the slew of new benefits for them.

Premier plays 'balancing act'

However, mindful that the traditional bumiputera quotas have eroded the country's global economic competitiveness, Najib also had to play a balancing act.

NONEEven though meritocracy is seen as taboo for the ethno-nationalist groups, the prime minister insisted before the more than 2,000-strong largely Malay crowd that the new procurements and entrepreneurship opportunities must be merit-based.

"It will be based on meritocracy, but meritocracy within the bumiputera community. Only then can the bumiputera compete," he said.

Najib, who is also Umno president, has had to play a difficult balancing act between liberalising the economy and resistance from ultra-right wing Malay rights groups.

He had to roll back some bumiputera quotas for the service and financial sectors in a bid to improve economic competitiveness when he first ascended to power in 2009.

However, ahead of the Umno elections, Najib cannot afford to ignore Malay nationalists groups that still have a strong grip on the party.

These forces have been on the offensive against the government after it dished out handouts to other communities, but still failed to capture their support in the May 5 general election.

But for all the balancing act there is to play, and with the party election only a month away, it seemed politically expedient that the prime minister capped off his speech with a rousing "Hidup Melayu! Hidup Bumiputera! Hidup Malaysia!" call.

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