

'MH17 can't save Najib from Isma and Perkasa'
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While Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's decisive handling of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 has earned him a popularity boost, it is unlikely to be sustained back home where he needs to juggle right wing groups such as Perkasa and Isma, reports the South China Morning Post (SCMP).

The Hong Kong-based newspaper heaped praise on Najib for his successful negotiation with rebel leader Alexander Borodai to secure the bodies of 298 victims on board Flight MH17 which was believed to have been shot down and crashed in separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine.

"The West only seems to remember Najib and Malaysia for the poor handling of Flight MH370, which vanished in early March and remains missing.

"But, by striking an agreement with Borodai, he achieved something tangible, which the political heavyweights failed to do despite grandiose speeches and threats of sanctions," it said.

SCMP quoted Southeast Asian politics expert Alan Chong at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, as saying that Najib's manoeuvring in the crisis was not unlike how he deals with matter back at home.

"The way Najib handled the MH17 challenge boils down to his modus operandi.

"As a seasoned politician, using back channels and cutting deals are classic moves from his playbook, similar to former prime minister Mahathir (Mohamad)," he was quoted as saying.

'Purported links'

However, the newspaper noted that at home, the premier also carried much baggage including his purported links to murdered Mongolian national Altantuya Shaariibuu and involvement in a controversial submarine deal when he was defence minister.

"Allegations of corruption remain rife and there are structural issues with the economy. Proper distribution of benefits to large swaths of society remains problematic as well," it said.

More pressing, the newspaper notes, is the rise of extremist groups such as Isma and Pekasa which have been spouting right-wing rhetoric.

"While the government will likely take up positions that support the mainstream Malay-Muslim opinion in the country, having vocal groups like Perkasa and Isma backing up the government will further alienate some segments, therefore denting Najib's popularity," S Rajaratnam School's Malaysian programme associate research fellow Afif Pasuni, was quoted as saying by SCMP.

It also quoted Malaysian Bar Council president Christopher Leong (right) as saying if Najib failed to manage these elements, then his popularity will quickly die out.

"If Najib is not seen to be handling the extremist elements firmly and decisively, then much of the shine on his star would wane.

"A substantial part of urban Malaysia is forward thinking and moderate, whilst a significant number in rural areas will follow the direction and tone of a strong leader. Najib needs to be that leader," he said.

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