

M'sia braces for anti-Najib rally in latest test for PM

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Police blocked off parts of the Malaysian capital as thousands of protesters prepared to descend on the city for a weekend rally demanding Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's resignation.

The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, or Bersih 2.0, expects about 200,000 people to demonstrate in Kuala Lumpur in its third major protest since Najib came to power in 2009. Police have deemed the gathering illegal and around 4,000 of them will be deployed.

Malaysia has faced two months of political upheaval after a report that Najib received billions of ringgit in his private accounts in 2013, and as he reshuffled the cabinet to remove detractors including his deputy.

While Najib has pushed back against detractors including former premier Mahathir Mohamad, and retains the support of senior officials in his party, a large rally would indicate growing public dissatisfaction with his leadership at a time the economy is slowing. Protests are also planned in other parts of Malaysia and countries including Australia.

"It will be the mother of protests - the police will jam the phone lines and make it difficult for us to protest," said David Lee, a 23-year-old college student. "It's our right. We want to say no to Najib."

The concern is the political noise is distracting the administration from the financial turbulence hitting the country amid a broader regional slump, said Chua Hak Bin, an economist at Bank of America Merrill Lynch in Singapore. Foreign funds have dumped more than US\$3 billion of the nation's shares this year and the ringgit hit a 17-year low.

"The fear is that it escalates into something violent," Chua said of the protests.

Police have backed off a possible plan to use Tasers, warning protesters not to break the law, Malaysiakini reported this week. In 2012, riot police clashed with protesters who broke through a barricade at Merdeka Square, firing tear gas and water cannons. Over 400 people were arrested.

Bersih has used social media networks and leaflets to organise the rallies, which will include the cities of Kuching and Kota Kinabalu in eastern Malaysia for the first time. The Home Ministry has declared the event illegal for inciting dissatisfaction against the government, while police said organisers haven't been granted the necessary permits.

More than 29,000 people have downloaded the FireChat messaging application - popularised in last year's Hong Kong protests - to stay connected if cellular networks are

congested, according to developers Open Garden. The police did not respond to phone calls seeking comment on whether phone lines could be blocked.

Personal accounts

The Wall Street Journal reported on July 3 that about US\$700 million may have moved through government agencies and companies linked to state investment company 1MDB, ending up in accounts bearing Najib's name before the 2013 election. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) said the money was from donors in the Middle East, not 1MDB. The accounts have since been closed.

Najib has denied taking money for personal gain. The receipt of political funds was to meet the needs of the party and the community and wasn't a new practice, the official Bernama news agency reported on Aug 9, citing Najib.

Bersih, which means clean in Malay, wants the government to reform institutions within 18 months and call an election. It wants to remove Najib's oversight of the finance ministry, attorney general's office and anti-graft agency, chairperson Maria Chin Abdullah said.

Previous protests drew a mostly urban crowd of minority Chinese and Indians. Analysts this time are watching if there will be more ethnic Malays, the bedrock of support for Najib's United Malays National Organisation (Umno).

"A huge turnout with many ethnic Malay protesters would send a message to Najib's party" and the Barisan Nasional coalition, said Ibrahim Suffian, an analyst at the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. "They will be forced to do something to rectify issues with Najib if they see overwhelming unhappiness."

Syed Ali Alhabshee (photo), an Umno division chief in Kuala Lumpur, said party leaders and members won't join the rally.

"They want to bring down the government by going to the streets," he said of the organisers. "We at Umno prefer to air our grievances at party meetings."

While Najib has a firm grip on his coalition through a network of government ministers and division heads, he has gone to grassroots gatherings to bolster support. At a meeting this month, Najib used a crude term to refer to Malays becoming outcasts in the country if Umno loses power, Bernama reported.

Those comments drew criticism. The Muslim Youth Movement, which has about 100,000 members, urged Malays to join the Bersih rallies to protest Najib's remarks. Malay rights group Perkasa, which counts Umno members in its ranks and Mahathir as a patron, said it had no objection if members wanted to join, The Malaysian Insider reported, citing its chief Ibrahim Ali.

"The outcome of Bersih is to bring an awareness to people and the same could be said for

Umno MPs,” said Nurul Izzah Anwar, a lawmaker with the opposition People’s Justice Party. “But they will be cautious because there is a potential for losing their positions in government, in Umno, if they go against Najib.”

- Bloomberg

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