

'What's to be ashamed of': Najib back on the stump despite guilty verdict

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Convicted of corruption less than a month ago and sentenced to 12 years in jail, former prime minister Najib Abdul Razak was back campaigning for a party candidate over the weekend in a by-election for a state assembly seat.

Out on bail, Najib is waiting for his appeal date to be set, while standing accused in two other trials and waiting for two more to begin - mostly linked to the looting of billions of dollars from defunct sovereign fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

Despite that, his party - Umno - and its ethnic Chinese and Indian party allies invited Najib to be their star campaigner for a by-election this month in Slim district, about 90 minutes north of Kuala Lumpur.

Najib was voted out of office in 2018 amid outrage over the 1MDB scandal. But since then, he has undergone a public relations makeover to shed his image as a

blue-blooded member of the elite and broaden his appeal to ordinary Malays.

With more than four million followers on Facebook and Twitter, he has become more popular on social media than any other Malaysian politician.

Having always denied guilt, Najib said the court verdict had not affected his voter appeal, or that of his party.

"On the contrary, some people say I have much more sympathy from the people," Najib told Reuters after breakfasting with supporters during a campaign stop in Perak.

Biker 'boss'

Najib's fortunes appeared to improve in February as his rivals' coalition government imploded, and Umno returned to power in an alliance led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

On the stump in rural Perak, Najib was very much in his comfort zone, though the numbers attending election rallies were restricted by coronavirus social distancing rules.

As he arrived at the breakfast gathering, loudspeakers blasted out a thumping rap to deliver Najib's catchphrase.

Using biker slang, the message goes: "What's to be ashamed of, my boss?"

Around a hundred supporters present cheered enthusiastically.

Later in the day, he visited homes in communities fringed by palm oil estates and posed for selfies over lunch at a restaurant.

Shahrum Abdul Rakeb, a diner, told Reuters Najib had his unwavering support.

"We will see how the situation turns out but either way, I still support him," Shahrum said. "I think the people have begun to realise, we know who is better for us."

Others were also unsure what to believe about 1MDB.

"We don't know for sure whether he is really guilty or not," said Vangdasalam Govindasamy, a 45-year-old voter.

"As far as I am concerned, when he was in power, he did things for us. He helped

us."

Making a comeback?

Some critics say Najib's camp has employed cybertroopers to amplify social media presence and paid people to show up at rallies.

"The momentum that we created... is coming from the people," Najib said, denying resorting to such tactics.

Political analysts say his comments on the economy had resonated with ordinary Malays, the most dominant ethnic group in Malaysia, revitalising his appeal, especially in more rural areas.

"On his social media, Najib speaks to the Malay working class. He is accepted as one of them," said Adib Zalkapli, Malaysia director for political consultancy Bower Group Asia.

Though he retains his seat in parliament, where Muhyiddin's alliance holds a wafer-thin majority, Najib cannot contest an election so long as the guilty verdict hangs over him.

Najib did not elaborate on his plans but said his priority was to be the "voice of the people". Few people would bet against him making a comeback if his appeal succeeds or he is granted a royal pardon.

- Reuters

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