

Najib: I was collateral damage in '99 GE
Malaysiakini.com
October 1, 2010

Prime Minister Najib Razak today inadvertently blamed the dispute between fourth Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his then deputy Anwar Ibrahim for what many feel was the greatest setback in his 35-year political career.

While he did not mention names, Najib said that the severe drop from a majority to a mere 241 votes in the Pekan constituency during the 1999 general election was a case of "collateral damage".



"There were times when I felt very frustrated with the situation, (that was) not as a result of my own personal action.

"It's the circumstances that you find yourself in. You are collateral damage - I don't know if that's the right word - of the process," he said.

Najib had said this at the Asean 100 Leadership Forum dialogue when asked if he had ever felt like throwing in the towel, particularly following the outcome of the 1999 general election.

The prosecution of Anwar in 1998 sparked protests causing BN to suffer a major setback.

'People wanted me'

"In 1999 I believe the Pekan people made a mistake, and actually wanted me in their hearts.

"Privately I can give you a host of reasons (they voted the way they did), some not to do with me," he told the audience of 100 from across the region.



The Pekan MP (*left*) added that it is party politics, and not winning the hearts of the rakyat, that had been the most challenging aspect of his long career

"Even though you are very competent, if you back the wrong horse, it can be quite tragic for you."

The PM was quick to point out, however, that the 1999 personal electoral disaster had prompted him to work harder, earning him a significant majority of over 22,000 votes in 2004.

The 2004 general election saw the BN, led by fifth Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, winning big.

"In 2008 (when the coalition lost five states to the opposition), I bucked the trend," Najib boasted, of his over 24,000 electoral majority.

No 'integrated resort'

Answering a question on the Economic Transformation Programme, the PM also touched on the highly-specified possibility of a Singapore-style 'integrated resort' on Malaysian shores.



Media speculation on the likelihood of a casino built as part of the resort had caused unhappiness amongst those opposed to legalised gambling.

"I told my colleague (Singapore Prime Minister Lee) Hsien Loong (*right in photo*) that I do not have the luxury of having an integrated resort in Malaysia, but need to find big projects that are catalytic," he said.

Karambunai Corp Bhd, said to be behind the proposal, has denied officially mooted the idea to the government.

Najib took the opportunity to highlight his good relations with Lee, repeatedly using the point-of-agreement issue as an example of good bilateral relations and amicable resolution to disputes.

"A possible route (to solving bilateral disputes) is through arbitration, like we did with Singapore...It is a friendly arbitration not an acrimonious one. If we say 'let's play hardball', relationships would sour out," he said.

He added that in the future, Asean would be more cohesive politically and "Malaysia will lead the way", having resolved the disputes with Singapore sensibly.

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