

Najib gears up for polls with rousing speech
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ANALYSIS Umno president Najib Abdul Razak's policy speech at the party's 61st annual general assembly yesterday created a buzz when he declared that the debate on Malay special position as "academic".

Both party leaders and BN component leaders hoped that this would douse the simmering race debates, sparked by the emergence of Malay-rights groups in the wake of the 2008 general election.

Since the landmark polls, many Malay groups - most notably Perkasa - and even former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad have been warning, time and again, that Malay political power and their special position are under threat.

This puts Najib on the horns of a dilemma - he cannot forsake Perkasa and his mentor as this will erode his support base in Umno, and he cannot regain lost ground in the general election without the backing from the non-Malays who are obviously spooked by the racial debate.

The solution? Allay fear among the Malays and strike fear among the non-Malays.

In yesterday's speech, he argued that constitutional provisions on non-Malay citizenship as well as Article 152, 153 and 181 - provisions on the Malay language, Malay special position and Malay rulers respectively - cannot be amended.

He said that even with a two-third majority in Parliament, no political force can amend these provisions without consent from the Malay rulers. Though left unmentioned, it implied that the rulers would not acquiesce to any change to existing provisions.

According to Najib, this made any debate on non-Malay citizenship and provisions concerning the status of the Malays redundant and the laws were designed in such a way to prevent any discussions on such topics altogether.

Clearing obstacles for economic reforms?

Over the past few months, party leaders and their mouthpiece *Utusan Malaysia* have repeatedly warned that the Malays must *bangkit* (rise up) and unite in view of an increasing vocal opposition, that is supported by the majority of non-Malays.

But this argument is likely to become superfluous given that Umno - that postures itself as the absolute voice for Malays - now claims that the constitutional special position of the Malays can never be challenged or amended in the first place.

In addition to this, Najib stated that even if the opposition were to form the federal government with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, the rights of the Malays will still be preserved.

This argument somewhat echoes PKR *de facto* leader Anwar Ibrahim's campaign message that the special position of the Malays will remain even if the opposition ascends to power.



Najib's assertions put into question Umno's claim that voting in the opposition would put Malay rights in jeopardy. But why must Najib make such a bold declaration?

It is likely that Najib's move would help put a lid on Perkasa - who claims that "protecting" Article 153 is its *raison d'être* - and similar critics such as Mahathir, who have frequently triggered race debates with their uncompromising stance on race relations.

Both Perkasa and Mahathir have been vocal critics of Najib's economic transformation and 1Malaysia programmes, particularly his plans on the gradual removal of affirmative action policies to bolster competition.

With Najib's assurance that Malay rights are firmly safeguarded, this may pave way for his economic plans - that involves liberalisation and reforms - without being further bogged down by communal concerns, in particular those from his party.

Hints that snap polls loom

But Najib's speech may also be addressing elements among BN component leaders who have had frequent run-ins with Umno leaders over race debates, forcing them to put an end to their spat and close ranks ahead of a possible snap elections.

The component parties have been quick to blame Umno's racial posturing for its heavy defeat in 2008 and the debate has yet to cease, causing considerable friction within parties, much unlike the gradual cementing of ties among opposition parties.

In fact, Najib's closing paragraph was an impassioned warning to Umno's opponents that BN will defend its hold of Putrajaya at all cost, and was another hint that this may be the last party assembly before the next general election.



Moreover, Najib reminded delegates that in 2011, it would be the 500th anniversary of the Malaccan empire's defeat by Portugese forces - a perfect opportunity to rouse Malay support for Umno during a snap election to avoid another 'humiliating' defeat.

Another sign from Najib's speech that polls was on the cards was his warning of racial strife, should discussions on race relations boil over.

Spectre of May 13

Traditionally, Umno has often raised the May 13 spectre to warn Malaysians about the dangers of fanning racial fires, but this year, Najib took it a step further.

He warned of "*kezaliman yang dahsyat* (incredible savagery)" should the "primordial instinct" be unleashed as a result of discussions on such constitutional provisions going out of control.

Najib said ethnic strife in other countries such as the holocaust, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Bosnian and Rwandan genocide as examples of 20th century atrocities resulting from ethnic conflict.

Over the past two and half years, there is little evidence to suggest that Najib's 1Malaysia approach to regaining non-Malay support has gained traction and it would be of little surprise if he was now reaching for the racial unrest playbook to press minorities into submission.

At the same time, he hopes to take the wind out of Perkasa's sails with his assurance to the Umno faithful that the Malay special position will stay for a long time to come.

But will Umno members listen to Najib?

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