

Najib struggles to make a mark in 2009
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Despite of a host of new economic and social policies, Prime Minister Najib Razak still struggles to win over the allegiance of voters and make an indelible mark in his first year in office.

In April, Najib was appointed as the country's sixth prime minister in the midst of a global economic meltdown and tumultuous local politics.

At the time he took over, Najib's ruling Barisan Nasional coalition was just beginning to come to terms with devastating losses in the 2008 elections, which sharply cut their majority in parliament, to slightly over 50 per cent.

The opposition, headed by former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, had taken control of five out of 13 states, and denied BN a two-thirds majority for the first time in over 50 years.

Najib's popularity rating then was at 43 per cent, the lowest of all recent prime ministers at the time of their appointments.

Eager to prove his critics wrong and win back some semblance of public support for the government, Najib, 56, promised a string of political and social reforms.

His first actions as premier were to lift bans on two opposition publications and release 13 people held under the draconian Internal Security Act that allows indefinite detention without trial for those accused of being threats to national security.

Najib also pledged to conduct a review of the law, but stopped short of repealing it.

As finance minister, he introduced bold economic liberalisation efforts to woo investment, including ending a 30-per-cent requirement for ethnic Malay ownership in 27 public services, and scrapping a decades-long policy requiring listed businesses to allocate at least 30 percent of their shares to Malays.

Najib is also pushing for improved efficiency in all ministries and government offices, and has used new media channels such as social network Twitter and Facebook to reach out to the public.

However, his approval ratings after six months in office stood at 56 per cent, a drop of almost 10 per cent from three months before, according to independent pollster, the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research.

Little support from within BN

A chief criticism of Najib has been his inability to put his policies and pledges of change into practice, Denison Jayasooria, a political analyst who previously worked with the ruling coalition, said.

"The initial period of euphoria and sloganeering has ended, and now what people want to see is the real institutionalisation of these slogans," said Denison. "A lot of promises have

been made, but formalising them has been lacking."

Analysts agree that Najib's inability to push through most of his reform plans is due to his team of ministers and party leaders, many of whom appear resistant to change.

"Najib appears to be very honest in trying to bring about change, but his team and ministers can't cope. He doesn't have a good team working with him," said Mohammad Agus Yussof, a political science lecturer at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

His ruling Umno managed to avoid any major controversies during its annual party assembly. But its main coalition partner the MCA is embroiled in an internal power struggle, while the third-largest party, the MIC, is losing support of ethnic Indian youth.

"I don't think his team are actually with him, and many of the leaders within BN seem unwilling to follow his lead," Denison said.

He said Najib now needs to look beyond his coalition partners to non-governmental groups which represent the needs and opinions of his voters.

"Seeing as the coalition parties in BN are losing the support of the voters, Najib must think out of the box and go to the ground and try and woo support groups, religious groups and so on," Denison said.

Alleged role in Altantuya murder

Najib's premiership also continues to be dogged by the shadows of scandals and controversy, namely his alleged role in the 2006 brutal murder of a Mongolian model whose body was blown up by military-grade explosives.

Analysts say the premier, who is the son of Malaysia's second prime minister, must act decisively or risk going down the same road as his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Abdullah, who came to power in 2003 with a large mandate, quickly fell from grace after he was perceived as ineffective in implementing his pledges of reform.

"Like his predecessor Abdullah Badawi, Najib is thus far satisfied merely with making highly publicised public pronouncements instead of attending to the necessary nitty-gritty of governance," wrote political commentator M Bakri Musa.

"It is attention to such practical and mundane details on which the success or failure of a policy, and a leader, would depend."

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