

One year on, PM still struggles to realise reforms

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Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak took office a year ago with big ambitions for political and economic reform but analysts say his plans have been hampered by the disarray in his own coalition.

Last day of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Najib Abdul Razak takes over as prime minister in Putrajaya Sworn in after his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was forced to step down following a dismal performance by their ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in the 2008 election, Najib outlined a bold agenda.

He pledged to spur growth, close the wealth gap between ethnic groups and reach out to minorities aggrieved by the pro-bumiputra affirmative action programme, which favours the country's Muslim Malay majority.

"He is on the right track," Ibrahim Suffian, head of the independent opinion polling firm Merdeka Centre told AFP, adding that Najib has done "remarkably well" given the circumstances.

"He has been able to regain some lost respect for the prime minister's position and some support for the government due to his firmness and competitiveness."

Minorities still alienated

But as the leader of an unruly coalition dominated by his own Umno party, Najib's efforts have been hindered by political infighting among the other BN members, weakening his position, Ibrahim said.

"As prime minister he tries to resolve the people's problems but as BN chairperson he is one way or another linked to the politicking that is going on, which people are fed up about," he said.

azlanThe son and nephew of two previous prime ministers, the 56-year-old Najib has made an effort to reach out to Chinese and Indian minorities - who deserted the BN at the last election - to join an inclusive '1Malaysia' agenda.

He has liberalised the banking and services sectors to attract much-needed foreign investment and vowed this week to review the bumiputra affirmative action policy, which has promoted the interest of Muslim Malays since the 1970s.

Ibrahim says Najib, a British-educated moderate Muslim, has enjoyed an average 60 percent popularity rating since he took office.

But critics say that his reforms have not gone nearly far enough, and that minorities are being alienated by the BN's fierce defence of the bumiputra policy and a rash of religious disputes.

NEM lack substance

These include church firebombings linked to a controversy over the government's refusal to allow Christians to use the word 'Allah' as a translation for God.

"He has prevaricated between pandering to conservative Muslim elements and making concessions to liberal forces to win the support of non-Malays," analyst Reuben Wong at the National University of Singapore said.

Export-dependent Malaysia has seen its economy - the third largest in South East Asia - contract by 1.7 percent in 2009 while foreign investment plummeted during to the global downturn.

Andrew Colquhoun of Fitch Ratings in Hong Kong said Najib's "New Economic Model," under which the review of the bumiputra policy will be carried out, "looks like an ambitious agenda" but lacked substance.

"We need to see what reaction there is from key stakeholders. I think Umno is at a crossroads in terms of what sort of political model it wants to follow," he said.

"Governments around the world can face difficulties in mustering support for reforms that promise long-term gains in return for short-term adjustments."

Piecemeal reforms

Critics have called for the repeal of the race-based policy, arguing it has bred an over-reliance on support from Malays - Umno's core vote bank - and improperly benefited the elites.

Steven Gan, chief editor of the influential online news portal Malaysiakini, said Najib was struggling to convince Umno members to support his agenda, as the party tries to recapture lost Malay votes from the resurgent opposition.

He said reforms so far were mostly "piecemeal," citing the failure to reform a controversial security law that allows detention without trial, and more reprimands for the tightly controlled media under Najib's year-long leadership.

"Najib has done something but whether it is successful is really hard to say at this point in time," he said.

"A lot of that relies on him winning over the conservative elements in Umno and, looking at the track record of Umno, he will get quite a bit of reluctance on issues such as phasing out the racial quota."

- AFP