

# Najib stays on solid ground

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Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has been the target of a smear campaign over the Altantuya case but he may have cleared another turning point after the doctored photo episode backfired on its Parti Keadilan Rakyat creator.



**INSIGHT**  
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**D**ATUK Seri Najib Tun Razak arrived for the Rompin Umno division meeting in a helicopter. The aircraft had to make an impromptu landing in a school field because the area where they were supposed to land was filled with tents erected for a *jamuan rakyat* that day.

The meeting was at the modern Uniten campus and as the Deputy Prime Minister said in his speech that morning, Umno and Rompin have come a long way.

Najib recalled visiting an Umno branch in Rompin more than 20 years ago. The village road was so bad he had to make his way on foot after the wheels of his car were stuck in the mud.

He also recalled an elderly teacher from the area who had no qualms about ringing Tun Razak Hussein to speak his mind, quite unbothered that Razak was not just his MP but also the Prime Minister.

More reminders of the early years came in the form of a framed drawing presented by Rompin Umno chief and long-time supporter Datuk Seri Dr Jamaludin Jarjis. It was an ink sketch of a teenage Najib with his parents and brothers, one of whom was still a chubby baby.

Najib has been on the go in the past weeks attending Umno division meetings all over the country and a number of themes have emerged from the speeches he made.

First is the general election. The signs point to early polls and he has been urging the Umno grassroots to work towards ensuring a strong mandate for Barisan Nasional.

Second is the Malay progress after 50 years of independence and the importance of keeping up with change, to be less reliant on the government, to be bold and to compete.

Third, he has used the Umno forum to strike back at the opposition parties, particularly Parti Keadilan Rakyat.

Najib has been the target of a PKR smear campaign from the day think-tanker Razak Baginda was arrested over the murder of the Mongolian woman.

The PKR attacks reached a peak during the Ijok by-election where he was taunted with chants of "Altantuya! Mongolia!" at every turn.

But the Barisan victory in Ijok became a turning point of sorts for Najib because it was the first time he directly rubbished allegations of a connection between him and the Mongolian case.

"Ijok was a real turning point. He went there knowing he would be the target. He had to roll up his sleeves and fight tooth and nail," said a political insider.

Najib has led five by-elections for Barisan since 2004 but Ijok was his toughest because he had to defend himself on a personal level. The latest and perhaps most controversial job is the by-now infamous picture that originated in the weblog of PKR's unconventional information chief Tian Chua.

The digitally composed photograph showed a grim-looking Najib flanked by a smiling Razak and a woman resembling the dead Altantuya Shaariibuu.

It was such a poor effort that no one in his right mind would take it seriously. In fact, it has backfired on its creator.

Blogger Syed Azidi Syed Abdul Aziz, better known by his *nom de guerre* Kickdefella, did a digital match and found that the image of Najib in the doctored photo was actually a picture of Najib taken when he spoke at the World Economic Forum.

Chua has admitted it was a digital job, so



**Another turning point:** Those trying to dislodge Najib have to understand that whatever the intensity of the storm blowing outside, he has solid standing in Umno.



**Khairy:** 'The important thing is that Umno accepts Najib's explanations'

why the fuss, some had asked.

For a start, this is not something that a party that claims a higher moral ground than Umno would resort to. Neither is it an act that a party aspiring to be taken seriously by the electorate would wish to be associated with.

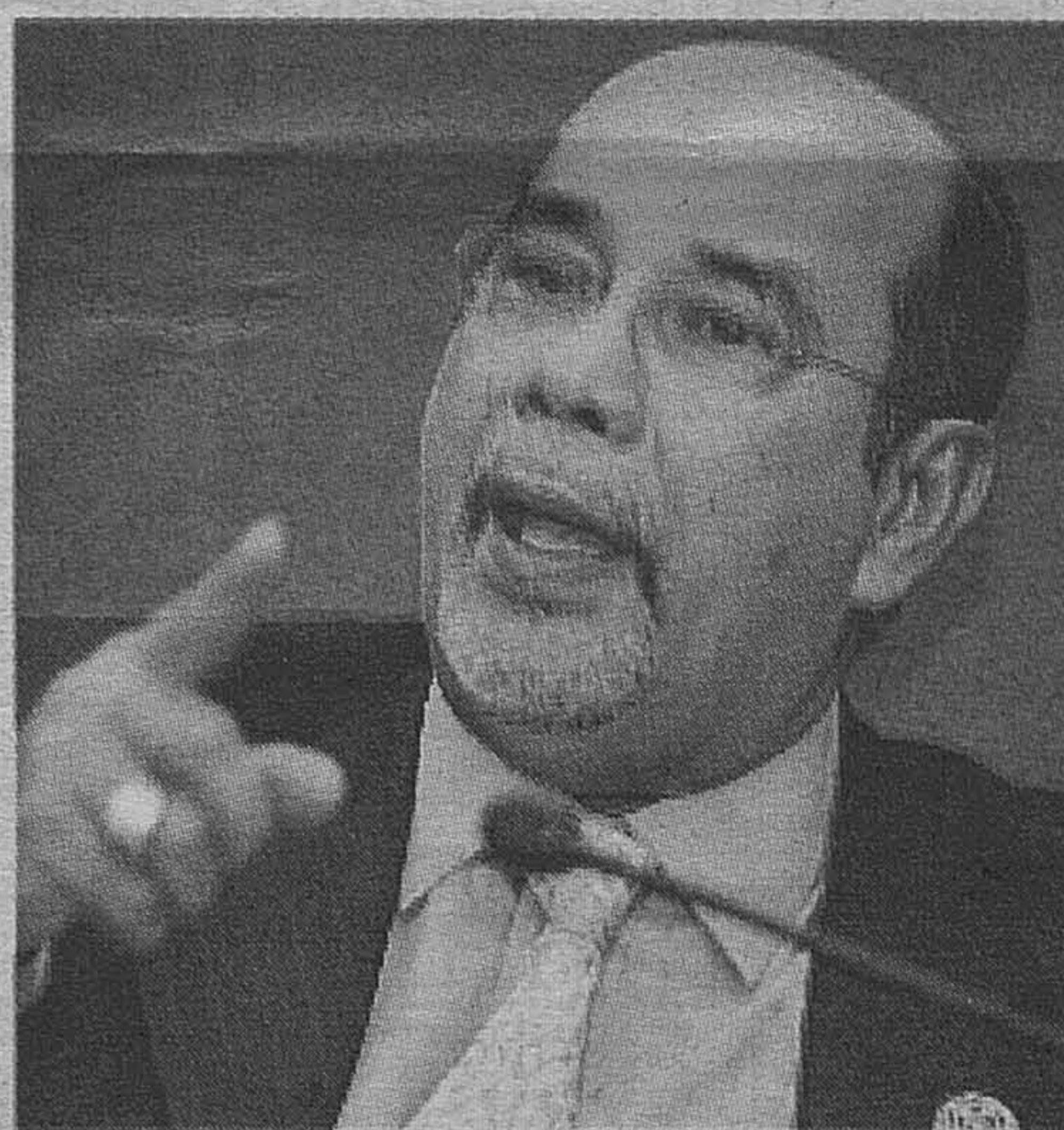
Chua's action also got a lot of attention because, as the information chief, he is ranked sixth in the party hierarchy.

It would have been fine if he had, from the start, qualified it as a joke or, as claimed, an attempt at satire. But it was only after the furore erupted that he began rationalising the reason for publishing the picture.

DAP politicians have been quietly disapproving of the whole affair. They were victims of similar underhandedness and are still seething over the doctored photograph portraying a few of them with communist leader Chin Peng posted on the Umno Youth website.

PAS leaders, on the other hand, were shaking their head in disbelief. They are seasoned politicians and their first reaction was that such clumsy deception would backfire should an actual photograph actually turn up.

Besides, PAS politicians know only too well the cruel power of a tampered photograph. They still believe the opposition alliance would have won the 1990 polls were it not for the photograph showing then ally Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah wearing a Kadazan head-



**Syed Hamid:** 'Don't try to instigate the PM about Najib, it's not going to work'

gear bearing what looked like a crucifix.

Politics, unlike football, is not a beautiful game.

Those close to Najib have asked him point blank if he has met Altantuya. Najib is very certain he has never met the woman or even knew of her, let alone had a picture taken with her.

"We have asked him many times, and he is adamant about it. He is confident there is no picture because he has never met or seen the woman. Why is it so hard to believe that Razak is a smart and savvy think-tanker but that he is very private about his private life?" said a close associate of Najib's.

Top Najib press aide Tengku Shariffuddin Tengku Ahmad said: "He did not even know of her existence. He is very confident there's no such photo in existence."

"We did not say anything when the case started because our stand was to let the investigation take its course but the opposition kept playing it up. It came to a point in Ijok when we felt that enough was enough."

Najib made his strongest stand in Ijok when he declared: "As God is my witness, I have never met Altantuya. What I know is what I read in the newspapers."

The botched photo incident may be yet another turning point for Najib.

"Najib has been under siege, a victim of

innuendos and allegations," said a Malay media consultant.

A pro-PAS friend of the consultant was so swayed by the conspiracy theories making the rounds that he was prepared to believe Najib was finished.

"But after seeing the photograph, my friend thinks there is a political game to frame Najib. Personally, I did not think much of it because the allegations were so extreme. I've always believed his pedigree would determine his conduct," said the consultant.

Najib has told his aides that he would let people judge for themselves how low PKR politicians were prepared to go.

Said Umno Youth deputy chief Khairy Jamaluddin: "The problem among some people is that they just refuse to listen even when it comes from the horse's mouth. I went through the same thing. The best way is to make your case and get on with your work."

The Prime Minister, he added, was also the target of speculative attacks last year but he rode it out.

"The important thing is that the party accepts Najib's explanations. These are experienced men, they've been through it a lot - Pak Lah last year and Datuk Najib this year. They're handling it with great composure and that's what we want from our leadership," said Khairy.

Those trying to dislodge Najib have to understand that whatever the intensity of the storm blowing outside, he is on solid ground in Umno.

He enjoys the confidence of the Prime Minister and he commands the ground for he has built up support at every stop of his long career.

"It is not something he needs to worry about. His network in the party goes back to his days as Umno Youth leader and everywhere he goes, people remember his father's contributions," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Najib, he said, has never been stronger than now in the party.

"The PM has complete and absolute trust in him. He is very supportive of his deputy and that is an important plus factor. Don't waste time trying to instigate the PM about Najib, it's not going to work. It would be difficult for anyone to come between them," said Syed Hamid.