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# Pushing hard for reforms in BN parties

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The prime minister's willingness to heed calls for change has brought Barisan Nasional some breathing space to prove its reform credentials, writes ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR

DATUK Seri Najib Razak took over as Malaysia's sixth prime minister earlier this year at a time when things were not well politically.

The morale of the 13-member Barisan Nasional coalition was at an all-time low; the loose opposition pact Pakatan Rakyat was still riding high on popular support following the opposition parties' unprecedented gains in the March 2008 general election.

But Najib was determined to institute reforms to win back lost support. The path he chose, though far from smooth, is turning out to be the right one.

Taking stock with his long years of experience in the government and as a politician, the prime minister vigorously pushed for BN component parties to change.

In seeking to win back the people's confidence and trust, Najib has emerged as a transformational leader.

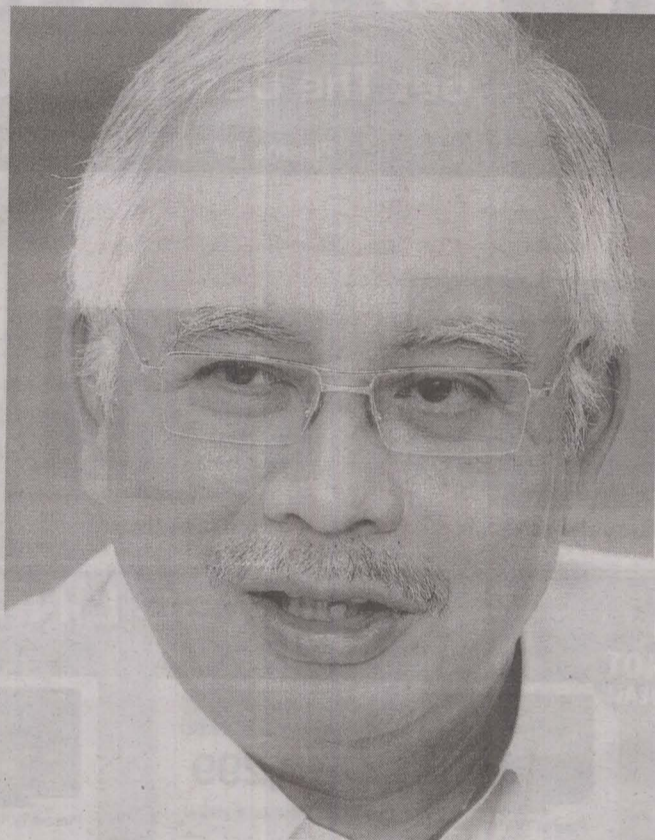
At the opening of Gerakan's 32nd annual delegates' conference last week, Najib asked BN component parties not to lose their fighting spirit, and make the critics eat their words. He told them to resolve their internal problems, strengthen BN, and be steadfast against political challenges.

"The train is moving," he said, "everybody must move together ... Gerakan, MCA, MIC, PPP and other component parties must move together. What are you waiting for? Solve your problems! Strengthen BN! Have the courage of your convictions!"

Until today, parties in the BN coalition are reeling from the March 8 tsunami and its aftermath. BN's founding parties — Umno, MCA and MIC, representing Malays, Chinese and Indians respectively — are all experiencing varying degrees of existential angst and racing against time to reposition themselves for the next general election.

Their positions are far from secure; the ground is still fluid despite the Pakatan Rakyat's honeymoon being over with an increasingly weary and wary public.

In attempting to regain the people's trust and confidence, Umno has pushed through



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drastic structural reforms to clear internal elections of political corruption.

As Umno president and prime minister, Najib pledged the party would be the champion of all by putting the people of all races above itself.

MCA's internal reform agenda is still unclear; the party is still fighting to put in place the "greater unity plan" hatched from a year-long power struggle between two of its top leaders.

MIC, unfortunately, appears to be still in denial despite the Indian community's loss of confidence in the party, opting to support other Indian-based parties and groups outside BN.

Other BN partners are in no better state. Gerakan is also divided by infighting, which contributed to the party's loss of Penang to Pakatan Rakyat.

Some political watchers now dismiss multiracial Gerakan, once dubbed "the conscience of BN", as irrelevant.

Pakatan Rakyat, led by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, is also flawed, with deep rifts in Pas,

the component with the strongest base compared to Parti Keadilan Rakyat and DAP.

Pakatan Rakyat is in much worse shape than when it started with a great promise of a "New Dawn" for Malaysia, winning itself bags of votes in last year's general election and subsequent by-elections.

But internal tensions are now undermining public confidence in its ability to run an effective government.

This was admitted by DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang, who said Pakatan Rakyat had been suffering a prolonged and unceasing loss of public confidence because of the failure to exercise responsibility and discipline in their respective parties.

Pakatan leaders, Lim said, had failed to convince the Malaysian electorate of their credibility, cohesion, integrity and common purpose.

PKR, for one, is proving to be fragile; the rising incidence of its elected representatives jumping ship to pledge support to BN, and the infighting that caused

Sabah PKR leaders to protest heavy-handed treatment by the peninsula-based central leadership, are weakening the party formed to fight for one man's struggle — Anwar's.

The frequent eruptions between Pas and DAP leaders, too, are diminishing their viability in the eyes of those who had supported them.

Pas now has its hands full with an old but renewed conflict between a faction wanting to forge Malay/Muslim unity with Umno and those who want to remain loyal to the opposition.

Last but not least, Pakatan Rakyat can collapse if Anwar loses his current sodomy trial and goes back to jail.

It remains to be seen if PKR, Pas and DAP will be able to settle their various internal spats as well as their differences with each other, and present a force capable of ending the BN era come the 13th general election.

Pakatan Rakyat proved its commitment to taking control of Putrajaya when it took the bold move of registering itself as a legal entity with the Registrar of Societies, naming former Umno minister Datuk Zaid Ibrahim as pro-tem chairman.

Should the application be approved, the country may witness the emergence of a new two-party era — it will be BN versus Pakatan Rakyat in future elections.

BN under Najib has managed to claw back some support. Najib has so far managed to hold together Umno and, to a certain extent, the wider Malay community, while gaining the trust of non-Malays with his 1Malaysia concept.

But he cannot possibly bring about the needed changes alone; Najib needs the full support of BN leaders.

It's too early to say whether what has been implemented so far will work well to BN's advantage; this will only be obvious after the next general election, which must be held by 2013.

But BN can rest assured that many of the votes that went to opposition parties last year were in protest of BN's perceived arrogance, and that is changing.