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# Najib gets stronger with time

Defying his critics' predictions, the Prime Minister has shown that he is here to stay.

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JUST a few months back, critics of the Prime Minister, and even many ordinary Malaysians, had dismissed him as a dead man walking.

They confidently predicted that Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak wouldn't last more than three months and that he would be replaced.

Well, it's already the end of the year and he is still in command. In fact, it wouldn't be wrong to say that he has grown stronger in the Government and the party.

As for his image, domestically and internationally, the jury is still out. But politically, his hold, or some would say his grip, has become tighter.

For many political analysts, this has been a most difficult year for Najib, and surely 2015 is an *annus horribilis*, or a horrible year in Latin, for him. But now he seems to have turned the tables on his opponents pretty well.

No one can deny that the stage was entirely Najib's when he welcomed world leaders including US President Barack Obama and China's Li Keqiang to Kuala Lumpur.

It was certainly his moment, and even his harshest critics would admit it. The opposition smartly kept their silence when civil society leaders met Obama and asked him to take a stand on the human rights situation, which they said had deteriorated since his last visit, as well as corruption and abuse of power.

The practising politicians, unlike the activists, understand well that

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calling for foreign power interference is simply not acceptable.

Obama is also politically savvy enough to understand the intricacies of diplomacy and the sensitivity involved in messing with the domestic politics of a friendly country.

Even with all the issues affecting the nation, it would surely be a challenge to our sovereignty for Obama to tell us how to run our affairs.

Yes, our image internationally has taken a beating and we think that foreigners look at us differently now, perhaps as a corrupt country with flawed politicians, but there is a line drawn.

As Umno holds its general assembly next week, it is clear that many have under-estimated Najib. Out of the 191 Umno divisions, at least 180 or more are solidly behind him. In short, the party has remained intact.

There are 20,000 Umno branch leaders and the party leadership is unlikely to flinch over a handful of branch leaders calling for Najib to step down.

His critics, including Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, have accused Najib of buying off these division leaders, but such a Machiavellian method of politics, where the end

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justifies the means, had taken root long ago.

Italian philosopher and politician Niccolo Machivelli's book, *The Prince* which justified immoral behaviour and dishonest acts as being normal and effective in politics, has long been a handbook for some powerful figures in the party.

Dr Mahathir himself has been blamed for his authoritarian acts against judges, who were removed, while Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has been implicated in money politics in Umno in his successful attempt to remove former Umno deputy president Tun Ghafar Baba.

Even Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi lost his bid to keep his vice-president post in the party's 1993 polls, and the fingers were pointed at Anwar then. Money was cited as a factor.

Money politics is simply a euphemism for corruption. So is the more innocuous term "allocation", if not properly justified, but Najib's opponents also carried a lot of heavy baggage. Some would say they have

carried out the same practices.

While many have become uneasy with the perception that Najib is seeking the support of many right-wingers, his former deputy prime minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, has also played the racial card, once raising eyebrows for saying he is a Malay first and only a Malaysian next.

Many moderate Malaysians are uncomfortable that low-level party leaders are allowed to go scot-free despite openly spewing racist remarks. Not many will buy the claim there is a lack of evidence to throw the book at them.

By now, it is a foregone conclusion that Muhyiddin does not have the numbers to take Najib on.

In fact, Anwar mounted a bigger challenge to Dr Mahathir.

Painful as it may seem to Muhyiddin, it is clear that it was Umno which made Muhyiddin and not the other way around.

The 1MDB issue raised many questions and still does, but despite the anger, the reality is that Umno members want to give their president a chance to resolve the issue.

Ironic as it may sound, one wonders how the majority of Malaysians, or for that matter Umno members, have reacted to the issue with its web of complexity.

Ironically, the business publication which highlighted the issue the strongest saw its circulation drop between the period of January and

July of this year.

Of course, there are still many who find it hard to accept that those implicated cannot be traced or that whistleblowers are perceived to be punished instead.

His biggest challenge is to manage the economy against the backdrop of the volatile oil price and the depreciating ringgit, with a bleaker market predicted for next year.

These are issues that the Prime Minister will need to deal with at one point or another. But the general election is still up to two years away. Britain's prime minister, the late Harold Wilson, said a week is a long time in politics.

For Najib, it has been months, but he has ridden through the rough waters. The volume of criticism against him has died down because even Dr Mahathir knows, and should acknowledge by now, that Najib is here to stay.

His miscalculating opponents, who thought Najib would be out by now, have instead found themselves out of their jobs.

Najib will have the rostrum to himself when he addresses the Umno delegates next week, and his listeners know that they want to be on the winning side.

It is called *realpolitik* – a German term to describe politics based primarily on considerations of power and on practical and material factors. In simple terms – they will be pragmatic.