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SINGAPORE FORUM

# Najib to match or perform better in GE14, say experts

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is expected to match or better his performance at the upcoming general election as the opposition is struggling to present a united front to challenge Barisan Nasional (BN).

The Singapore *Straits Times* (ST) said experts at The Straits Times Global Outlook Forum came to this conclusion during their discussion yesterday.

Among speakers were co-founder and director of programmes at Malaysian pollster Merdeka Centre For Opinion Research, Ibrahim Suffian.

He was quoted as saying that while the financial scandal involving Malaysia Development Bhd (IMDB) had grabbed headlines around the world, bread-and-butter issues were expected to top the concerns of Malaysian voters at the next election.

“Top of the mind in terms of what voters care about are the cost-of-living issues.

“Those, rather than the IMDB issue, will be the main factors affecting public mood,” Ibrahim told the panel discussion, titled “Malaysia’s Next GE: The Perils And Prospects”, at the OCBC Centre in Singapore.

Ibrahim said the Malaysian public had been pressured by rising prices after the government cut state subsidies and launched the Goods and Services Tax in the wake of the last election.

The newspaper reported that even though voters were unhappy with the government’s economic performance, Najib was still expected to have a firm grip on power as the largely-Malay electorate was likely to put their trust in the hands of Muslim-dominated parties, such as Umno, and even Pas.

Ibrahim was quoted as saying that because race and religion re-

mained a reality in Malaysian politics, voters would cast their ballots for parties they believed would protect their interests.

He also said former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia would find it hard to gain traction among voters. The party would find it tough to survive without a pact among opposition parties to avoid contesting against each other, he added.

Another panellist, Ong Keng Yong, the ambassador-at-large at Singapore’s Foreign Ministry, was also optimistic about Najib’s prospects.

“People may have their views on IMDB and the party politics, but if you go by what Ibrahim has said, based on the government performance and the state of the race and religious relations, I don’t feel there is enough to shift people away from Najib,” said Ong, who was Singapore’s former high commissioner to Malaysia.

The panel is the first of two discussions held in the run-up to ST’s annual year-end Global Outlook Forum. The forum brings together experts, who would review key events in the year and the challenges they pose to the year ahead.