

NAJIB SEEKS RADICAL CHANGE OF IMAGE

NST- 8/2/2019 Pg. 6

Ex-PM tries to elicit public sympathy before corruption trial

KUALA LUMPUR

DISGRACED former prime minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has been out in recent weeks campaigning as if for an election, trying to shed the image of a wealthy, elite politician and elicit public sympathy before his corruption trial begins on Tuesday.

Najib has pleaded not guilty to charges of criminal breach of trust, abuse of power and money laundering, in what is set to be the first of many trials over suspected multibillion-dollar fraud at state fund 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

The trial starts nine months after Malaysians voted Najib out of office in a general election dominated by public disgust over allegations some US\$4.5 billion were stolen from 1MDB, and about a quarter of it went into his

personal bank accounts.

Police found nearly US\$300 million worth of goods and cash at properties linked to Najib soon after the May election.

But as the trial date nears, Najib, who has maintained his innocence, has sought a radical change of image, painting himself as a victim of a vindictive government led by Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The 65-year-old son of the second prime minister is also trying to build an image as a folksy voice of working people, especially Malays.

Najib, in a viral video last month, crooned a Malay-language version of the 1970s hit *Kiss and Say Goodbye*, surrounded by a chorus of sombre young singers, criticising Dr Mahathir's coalition for failing to live up to election promises.

"On May 9, 2018, I was ousted.

All this time, I have been fighting with my life for the people I love. But what can I do?" an earnest Najib said of his "saddest day" in the introduction to the song.

Najib had also been hitting out online. His jibes against ruling party politicians on Facebook and Twitter had some social media users referring to him as "King of Trolls".

A relaxed, casually dressed Najib also paid a visit this month to Langkawi, Dr Mahathir's island constituency, where he potted around town, visiting markets, eating at hawker stalls and rubbing elbows and posing for selfies with passersby.

Dr Mahathir was not impressed. He told a news conference last week Najib seemed to be getting popular on social media because "he provides a lot of stories".

Harvinderjit Singh, one of Najib's lawyers, declined to comment on the former premier's public appearances, but said the 1MDB trials were unlikely to be affected by the hoopla.

"The case is going to be determined by what happens in court, not out of it," he said.

1MDB TRIAL

While Najib has been trying to build public support, the Attorney-General's Chambers (A-GC) has been building a formidable team to prosecute Najib, his wife and a host of other former top officials charged with corruption. All of them pleaded not guilty.

The prosecution had been recruiting top notch criminal attorneys, including former General Court judge Gopal Sri Ram and Sulaiman Abdullah, a lawyer with a background in cases of white-collar crime.

The A-GC had also recalled several prosecutors from state offices to join the team, two lawyers with knowledge of the matter said.

The A-GC did not respond to a request for comment.

Najib had a defence team of eight lawyers, led by Tan Sri Muhammad Shafee Abdullah, who once represented the gov-

ernment in a sodomy case against former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Najib could face years in prison. He faces 39 criminal charges over losses at 1MDB and other state entities.

Seven of those charges will be the subject of Tuesday's trial, relating to transfers totalling RM42 million ringgit into Najib's personal bank account from SRC International, a former 1MDB unit.

Prosecutors have handed nearly 3,000 pages of documents to the defence ahead of the trial, said Najib's lawyer Harvinderjit.

The documents included statements from 26 witnesses, some of whom were SRC officials, who will likely be called to testify.

Najib, who has not been asked to testify in his own defence, hopes only for a fair trial, Harvinderjit said.

"Our client is of the view that if he gets a fair trial, then the truth will show itself to the public," he said. **Reuters**