

# A 'different Najib' on campaign trail

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The former Prime Minister's Facebook followers have sky-rocketed to more than half a million since he became the opposition and especially after he started campaigning in the Cameron Highlands by-election. But the sitting Prime Minister will soon descend on the highland seat to make an impact of his own.

Analysis by JOCELINE TAN

PAKATAN Harapan politicians say he is headed for jail but for now, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is still a free man and he is making the most of it as he joins the campaign trail in Cameron Highlands.

One would not have thought there are 25 charges of corruption and money laundering hanging over Najib as he made his way through the highlands seat.

Those watching on feel as though they are looking at a different person. The old Najib was stiff, formal and surrounded by tight security.

The Najib they saw was casual, relaxed and easy-going.

"He is no longer the PM, anyone can approach him," said Lanchang assemblyman Datuk Seri Mohd Sharkar Shamsudin.

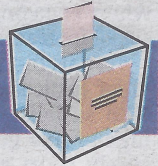
Najib's social media presence has also been making waves.

An Instagram photo of him and an orang asli man with their arms wrapped around each other got 26,000 likes within two hours. By yesterday, the post had garnered more than 56,000 likes.

## BY-ELECTION

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HIGHLANDS

Polling: Jan 26



Sharkar had teased Najib: "Last time people hug you because you can sign (letters of approval), now it's genuine."

Najib's Facebook followers, which used to hover around 300,000, have shot up to more than half a million.

His Facebook postings on the by-election have been sharp, down-to-earth and witty, and each posting draws thousands of likes and comments.

A posting of him putting on a helmet to ride a motorbike garnered nearly 72,000 likes and more than 8,000 comments.

Najib has been the surprise news-maker in Cameron Highlands while Barisan's candidate Ramli Mohd Nor who Najib described as "a gem from the orang asli community", seems unable to shake off his stern police officer demeanour.

The Cameron Highlands polls has turned out to be more interesting than others previously. The leading reason is that Barisan Nasional won by a slim majority of 597 votes.

Both sides know it would take a swing of only a few hundred votes for the seat to fall to Pakatan, and that is why they are giving it their all.

Pakatan candidate M. Manogaran is more experienced and ready for the job. The DAP politician was a former Teluk Intan MP. He is articulate and vocal unlike Ramli.

Manogaran is no stranger to Cameron Highlands, having contested the seat in GE14.

But his party is suffering a trust deficit among the Malays.

Moreover, the 3,500 voters who supported the PAS candidate in GE14 are now likely to support Ramli.

A hint of that came after Friday prayers in the area when Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail and PAS deputy president Datuk Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man exchanged a tight embrace.

Tuan Ibrahim had earlier deli-

vered the Friday prayers sermon.

This is also the first by-election in a Barisan-controlled state.

Pakatan has to tread a little more carefully in their attacks against Najib because he has taken good care of his home state.

In fact, the Sungai Koyan mosque where he and several other political bigwigs from both sides of the divide prayed on Friday was built using funds from his prime minister's allocations.

Najib still has substantial Malay support going by the warm reception he received in the Felda schemes and orang asli areas.

The mood among many settlers is that life was better under Barisan rule.

People in these parts have never heard of the best-selling book on the 1MDB scandal, *Billion Dollar Whale*.

Incomes of palm oil smallholders have shrunk by more than 60% because of plummeting oil palm prices and they blame the new government.

Cameron Highlands has been plagued by serious environmental issues because of questionable

farming methods but nobody dares to criticise because the farmers are also voters.

There has not been a squeak about the notorious "surat kuning" – the euphemism for the letters of endorsement from palace officials that were used to enable new land clearings for farms.

Nobody wants to offend the palace especially given that the next King may be the newly proclaimed Sultan of Pahang.

Feedback suggests that DAP's support among the Chinese and Indian electorate in Cameron Highlands is quite intact.

If they want to snatch the seat from Barisan, they need to make inroads into the Malay and orang asli areas.

That is the real battle ground and their plan is to bring in the star power of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is expected to join the campaign later this week.

The two nemeses – the former and current Prime Ministers – have often crossed swords but will their paths cross this week in the battle for Cameron Highlands?