

The year the government repeatedly changed its mind
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KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 31 — A growing public demand for accountability forced the government this year to make many about-faces and policy U-turns, characterising what critics would say was a weak administration but supporters might call responsive management.

And voters will get to eventually decide if they want to punish or reward Barisan Nasional (BN) when Datuk Seri Najib Razak calls elections.

The Malaysian Insider reviews some of the year's notable changes in position and direction.

Bersih 2.0 rally

Bersih protesters making their way through Jalan Sultan in the capital city on July 9
The first Bersih rally in 2007 was credited with shrinking the ruling coalition's voter support in Election 2008 that led to Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's early exit from government and his successor, Najib, appeared keen to avoid a repeat.

The Najib administration initially moved to nip the problem in the bud by detaining several individuals campaigning for the July 9 rally on suspicion of security risks to King and country and banning T-shirts bearing the images of communists as well as yellow-coloured clothes.

But days before the street march in the capital city, the Yang di-Pertua Agong stepped in to calm the rising storm and the seventh prime minister softened the government's stance against Bersih 2.0, led by lawyer-activist Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, and offered the 62-member coalition the use of a stadium of choice for its rally demanding a cleaner and more transparent electoral system.

When the electoral reform movement demanded Stadium Merdeka, Najib said he meant the Shah Alam stadium in Pakatan Rakyat-controlled Selangor, leading to yet another stalemate.

The 72 hours leading to the rally became fuzzy as misinformation reigned.

City police issued a lockdown on the capital and got a court order barring entry to 92 individuals, including the movement's leaders.

However, videos of harsh police action against the peaceful protestors went viral online and through social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter.

Faced with global criticism, the government conceded it may have mishandled the incident.

PSC electoral reform

Datuk Seri Maximus Ongkili, in charge of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reform.

On August 15, five weeks after the July 9 rally, Najib announced the set up of a bipartisan Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) on electoral reform, addressing Bersih 2.0's eight demands.

But the very next day, Najib's deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the PSC would only fine-tune and not reform the electoral processes. It was not the first time Muhyiddin had voiced a different view from his boss, raising questions of unity within the Najib Cabinet.

The PSC kicked off its public hearings for feedback on November 11, and several recommendations have been made since. The Election Commission has endorsed recommendations like indelible ink for the next general election.

Bumiputera quota

Najib speaking at the Umno General Assembly, the group he needs to convince whichever way he takes Bumiputera quotas.

Pro-Bumiputera quotas remain as part of the government's economic policies.

On September 27, Najib said, "We want to do away from (with) quotas but we must support them (Bumiputera entrepreneurs) in a way that would allow them to grow" in a bid to calm growing unhappiness with the affirmative action plan that favoured one community.

After suggestions that the PM had decided to abolish quotas, Najib clarified three days later: "I did not say we want to abolish quotas, but I said we cannot be too reliant on them".

National Feedlot Corp scandal

Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil, under fire for her family's involvement in the NFC.

It started off with Najib being firmly with Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil, after story broke that her family members had been very liberal with the use of a RM250 million soft loan to a National Feedlot Corporation.

The company was set up to reduce Malaysia's dependency on foreign beef. However the pasture for the company extended as far as Bangsar condominiums and other baffling purchases.

As the attacks grew on Shahrizat's CEO husband, Umno's resolve to defend its Wanita Umno chief weakened, as did the reluctance of the authorities to investigate the case.

Police and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Agency eventually started investigations after seeing widespread public dissatisfaction.

Peaceful Assembly Act/Bill 2011

Bar Council members march to Parliament to voice their objection to the Peaceful Assembly Bill November 29 2011.

On the eve of Malaysia Day on September 16 Najib went on live television and promised the end of oppressive laws such as the Internal Security Act, Banishment Act and a slew of laws used to suppress political dissent.

There was a collective sigh of relief, but within days his cousin Hishammuddin announced that there would be new laws to fill the void.

On November 24, as a show of progress since Bersih 2.0, the Peaceful Assembly Bill was tabled.

It was pilloried instantly by legislators, and citizens were not far behind.

Critics said the new law, despite its name, would create more restrictions on the right of the public to assemble than the laws it would be replacing.

The government was forced to modify part of the law but many social activists and opposition politicians remain unhappy with the legislature that was eventually passed by Parliament.

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