

Najib says not yet right time for polls
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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 13 — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak told the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) he is not comfortable calling for elections yet as the government must show his economic reforms are producing real results.

“Essentially, it’s a call you have to make on the basis of a feel-good factor, and that’s when you press the button. But of course at the end of the day it’s a rather intuitive decision,” the WSJ reported him as saying in its interview published today.

Speculation has been rife that Najib (picture) will be pressured to call for a general election soon due to the worsening global economy.

“You can have all the polling numbers but you must have the sense that this is the right time.

“I hope it will be the right time soon enough, but we still have to deliver on our promises and it’s important for people to have the feeling that the reforms we have promised will actually benefit them,” he said.

The PM acknowledged the global economic slump, especially the debt crisis engulfing Europe, could complicate his decision to press the election button.

“But so far we are still quite comfortable because our exposure to the EU in terms of total trade is only about nine per cent, so we are less vulnerable.

“But a euro-zone collapse or some other catastrophe there will affect the whole world,” he said in the interview with the WSJ.

The influential international paper reported today that Najib has been eager to paint himself as a leader of Malaysia’s most sweeping political reforms since independence.

The US-based daily noted that the PM appeared to be betting that the court acquittal of his political foe Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from a sodomy charge on Monday would help rather than hurt him politically.

Turning to the Anwar verdict, Najib said it was unclear whether prosecutors would opt to appeal, saying it was a matter for the Attorney-General.

But he said that the acquittal would likely help to convince critics that the government does not interfere in politically-charged judicial cases.

Anwar has accused Najib’s government of orchestrating the case against him. Najib denies having anything to do with the case.

Najib said in the interview that both the government and opposition camps will step up their race to claim the centre-ground of Malaysian politics in the coming months — but that this

will only strengthen the predominantly Muslim country and provide a fresh example that democracy and Islam can co-exist.

The newspaper pointed out that both sides, though, seem to sense that the outcome of the vote depends on whether they can capture mainstream voters who are more interested in the economy than scandals.

Anwar told the Wall Street Journal earlier this week that he is now reconfiguring the opposition alliance to tackle a gamut of issues in the upcoming vote, from ensuring greater economic freedoms to tackling poverty and stamping out corruption.

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