

Mismanagement, slowing economy tripping Najib's GE campaign
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KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 28 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak's pre-polls charm offensive could sputter on alleged mismanagement of government projects and an uncertain economy despite the prime minister announcing a slew of reforms to boost voter support for the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), say opposition lawmakers.

In recent months, Najib repealed three Emergency declarations, pledged to abolish the Internal Security Act (ISA), tabled a contentious Peaceful Assembly Bill, formed a parliamentary select committee on electoral reform and given more leeway to university students to participate in politics.

Pua said Najib has kept largely silent on crucial issues. — File pix
But a minister's family's handling of the RM250 million National Feedlot Centre (NFC) and an inflation rate that has remained at 3.4 per cent for two months is a challenge to Najib, who remains personally popular with a 59 per cent approval rating.

"With Pakatan Rakyat milking the NFC scandal to its maximum among the rural community, coupled with rising prices and stagnating income, the likelihood of a silent tsunami in the traditional strongholds of Barisan Nasional cannot be ignored," DAP national publicity secretary Tony Pua told The Malaysian Insider.

The NFC has been dogged by allegations of corruption and fund misappropriation after it made it into the pages of the Auditor-General's Report for 2010, which described the project "as a mess".

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) lawmakers have alleged NFC funds were used for Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil's personal expenses, and that the project was a failure.

Pua said Najib's "major announcements" meant little hope for proper reforms, saying the prime minister had kept largely silent on crucial issues of discrepancies in government projects highlighted by the Auditor-General.

Likening Najib to predecessor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Pua described the PM as an "aloof" leader who avoided taking up clear decisive positions on key policy announcements.

"His popularity ratings are not significantly higher than that of Abdullah Badawi before the last general election, hence I would not be surprised if the outcome of the next general election once again exceeds the expectations of most, including Najib and Umno," said the DAP leader.

Pua said Najib's "trickle down" economic measures did not help address the fact the country was undergoing tough economic times, and that his administration's cash handouts and "mega-project" announcements did little to help ordinary Malaysians on a day-to-day basis.

Government officials have maintained GDP growth projections of between 5-6 per cent for

next year thanks partly to the implementation of projects identified in the Economic Transformation Programme.

Most research houses however expect Malaysia to grow between 3-5 per cent.

The World Bank said last Monday that Malaysia's economy is expected to slow further in the remainder of 2011 and into early 2012 mainly due to the deterioration in the outlook for external demand and expects growth of 4.9 per cent next year.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its September report, had forecast growth of 5.2 per cent this year and 5.1 per cent in 2012 for Malaysia.

Nurul Izzah said Najib was trying to gain support from middle-class Malaysians who are, according to her, mainly Pakatan Rakyat supporters.

PKR vice-president Nurul Izzah Anwar pointed out that Najib has always refrained from responding or getting involved with issues concerning alleged government scandals, and has always left that to ministers and their deputies to respond.

"Aloof is a right word to describe him. A carefully coiffured and choreographed Najib might have the opposite effect to voters and Umno leaders alike," she told The Malaysian Insider.

The first-term Lembah Pantai MP charged that Najib's sudden push towards civil rights reform was to gain support from middle-class Malaysians who are, according to her, mainly Pakatan Rakyat supporters.

"His constant reference on the BN version and approved human rights is distasteful and might turn off many Middle Malaysians who remain the major target of his proposed reforms.

"It showcases his superficial understanding of Malaysians' rights as enshrined under the Constitution, leading many to believe he is stuck in an Asian values' timewarp," she said.

Umno's Datuk Abdul Rahim Bakri admitted the "Najib factor" has been a crucial element in regaining back votes lost from Election 2008.

"Datuk Seri Najib is a powerful factor in reaching out to voters across Malaysia, but everyone, even in BN, has to understand this is not enough.

"Every party, every leader must work together to achieve what we have set out in the government's various transformation programmes," he told The Malaysian Insider.

The deputy minister of transport however brushed aside claims that Najib was an aloof leader, saying that it was unfair to compare him to previous prime ministers or Umno presidents.

"You cannot compare him to someone like Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed. Maybe Dr Mahathir had a different approach to things, Najib is someone who looks at the bigger picture.

"Some issues can be handled by respective party leaders or even government ministries. The PM already has a lot on his plate," said the Kudat MP, referring to the NFC scandal.

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