

Putrajaya's shuffle on polls reform show cracks in Umno, say Pakatan
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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 21 — The Najib administration's shifting position on a parliamentary select committee (PSC) to discuss electoral reform points to a growing rift between the prime minister and his party Umno, which has been the government's lynchpin since Independence 54 years ago.

The latest development within the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition has rattled even foes Pakatan Rakyat (PR), which is concerned that more reforms will be delayed as Datuk Seri Najib Razak tries to gain ground support as he deals with the hawks in his administration.

Najib's New Economic Policy (NEM), mooted last year to transform Malaysia and make it more competitive, was delayed and diluted before being slowly rolled out.

PAS deputy president Mohamad Sabu believes Najib's apparent reversal is to buy time for the country's sixth prime minister to gain support from the bloated civil force and fence-sitters ahead of polls due to his fallout with Umno veterans.

"I don't think Najib and BN are serious about reforms," he told The Malaysian Insider after launching an anti-price hike campaign to undercut BN of Bumiputera support in the city yesterday.

"They are just opening the valve to relieve the pressure but are not serious to conduct clean and fair elections. Yes, they are buying time," he added, referring to the intensifying heat facing the BN after Bersih 2.0's July 9 rally, which saw thousands of people take to the streets in the capital despite a citywide police clampdown.

The PAS man popularly known as Mat Sabu claimed that certain factions in Umno, were not satisfied with Najib's reforms and were stirring up a revolt against the party and coalition head.

He named Penawar and Amanah Merdeka as examples of the dissatisfied crew, saying both were non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from Umno led by veterans that were against Najib.

Mohamad said because of that, Najib is looking for support elsewhere.

"I don't think he can consolidate his support from Umno veterans but buying time for government officers and to reply to Buku Jingga," he added, referring to the orange book spelling out the PR's election promises for the next polls.

DAP advisor Lim Kit Siang shared some of Mohamad's views, saying Najib's flip-flop was a political ploy to confuse the public as to his actual agenda and hope they will forget all about it.

"It appears to be the case," he told The Malaysian Insider when contacted last night.

The Ipoh-Timur MP suggested that Najib may be trying for a positive initiative to redress his administration's fumble over last month's Bersih 2.0 rally but failed to swing the hawks in

Umno to his side.

"He couldn't overcome the opposition, the criticism of the hardliners as Muhyiddin has made clear," Lim said, referring to Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is also Najib's lieutenant in Umno and the BN.

Muhyiddin insisted last Tuesday that the current electoral system was fair and transparent and only needed some tweaking.

The opposition veteran also said that the "hardliners" might have got input from other sources, naming the Election Commission (EC) as a possibility.

"They can't be happy with the idea when all along they've maintained there's nothing wrong with the system," Lim said.

Unlike his two political allies, PKR's communications chief Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad to say that Najib was trying to delay carrying out polls reform.

"It does not make sense for him to say one thing and then change his stand so quickly," the Selangor state lawmaker said.

"Having a select committee means you accept there are irregularities within the system, but to then say we don't have to wait for the results, we can have elections anytime does not make sense. There's ample time until the end of the mandate," he pointed out.

The government's term ends only in 2013, but elections are widely expected to be called by year end. Analysts predict a gloomier global economy for next year, which may make it harder for Najib's administration to introduce its economic policies, such as the goods and services tax (GST).

Nik Nazmi said whatever Najib's motives for shifting his position could only be speculated, but said it looked as if the PM was trying to move forward from the Bersih episode but was being pulled back by others.

"The PM can say something and the No. 2 can say something else," he added, in an oblique reference to Muhyiddin.

Najib announced the bi-partisan polls reform panel last Monday, some five weeks after Bersih 2.0 took to the streets of the capital city to call for free and fair elections. Police locked down the city but nearly 50,000 people still turned up.

A similar rally in November 2007 was credited for BN's poor showing in national polls held in March 2008, where the ruling coalition lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority and four more states.

National newswire Bernama had reported Najib saying last month: "This is so that we can reach a consensus in facing the next election without any suspicion about any manipulation by the government."

Four days later, he appeared to have changed his view, saying the timing of general elections would not depend on the panel's proceedings.

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