

BN, Pakatan to target Malay votes as reforms take back seat, Economist predicts
The Malaysian Insider
September 09, 2011
By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 9 — An influential international weekly took aim at Malaysia's lop-sided racial policies in its latest issue and expects both the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) to pander to the Malay vote despite the risk of further damage to already frail ethnic ties.

In its September 10 issue, The Economist Online said the signs pointed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak calling for a general elections as early as end of this year, ahead of the 2013 expiry of his government's mandate, for three reasons.

It observed that Najib was still popular; that the national economy was upbeat now but may not be next year because of the global economic storm gathering in the West; and that the still fledgling PR pact was caught in a mess over the possibility that their leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim may end up in jail soon for sodomy without leaving a clear alternative candidate to be prime minister.

The widely-read news magazine said it expected Najib (picture) to win, but noted his government has been giving away free bullets to the opposition, most notably through its "cack-handed crackdown" on electoral reform movement Bersih 2.0's July 9 rally in the capital city.

It went on and listed too Najib's seeming back-track and delay over a laundry list of electoral, economic and government reform policies to improve Malaysians' lives, including the PM's failure to follow through and postpone elections to after a bipartisan parliamentary review panel — mooted by the PM as an acknowledgement of his administration's mishandling of the Bersih rally.

It highlighted, however, that the heart of the problem lay in the long-expired, racially discriminatory New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced by Najib's father and the country's second prime minister Tun Razak Hussein designed to soothe Malay fears of being sidelined by the Chinese and the Indians.

"Whatever technical reforms are made before the next election, it will still be dominated by the original sin of ethnic discrimination set out in the country's 1957 constitution," it said in its Banyan column.

The Economist, however, did not free from responsibility the three-party PR pact in the article headlined "The haze and the malaise: Ethnic politics makes Malaysia's transition to a contested democracy fraught and ugly".

"Both government and opposition talk of dismantling these privileges, which have contributed to corruption and large-scale emigration," it said, and added that with elections looming, "it is the Malay voter whose opinion matters, and he is assumed to resent any effort to curtail his privileges".

"And that means that both coalitions have to resort to defending the indefensible: a system in which families that have lived in Malaysia for generations are told to tolerate

discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, to bolster allegedly fragile racial harmony," it said.

It observed that the division between Malay and non-Malay was worsened because the Malays, who must constitutionally be Muslim, have become more conservative in their religion.

"It is alarming that, instead of seeing competitive politics as a way of bridging the ethnic divide, too many Malaysian politicians see the ethnic divide as a way of winning the political competition," it concluded.

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