

After two years as PM, Najib losing middle ground
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 15 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak risks drifting further away from the centre if he does not deliver on his reform initiatives and continues to “pacify” right-wingers, analysts have warned.

Pundits have charged that Najib has been moving away from a centrist position since taking office as prime minister in 2009, saying his indecisiveness in carrying out policies mirrored that of his predecessor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Delayed economic reforms, the New Economic Model’s (NEM) watered-down emphasis on competitiveness in its final version, coupled with Najib’s (picture) poor handling of the July 9 Bersih are instances where the PM has been accused of placating the demands of right-wing groups as well as members within Umno.

“In the long run Najib is moving to the right, and is running a big risk. Not everyone supports right-wing sentiments.

“There is credence to the arguments that Najib is drifting away from the centre. Despite his proposals for reform and overtures to the non-Malay community, these are still in traction,” said Merdeka Center director Ibrahim Suffian.

Ibrahim believes that not much has changed since Najib introduced his government transformation programmes, pointing out that the results have not “trickled down” to the public.

The polls expert stated that economy was the ultimate determining factor as to future voter support, and that turbulent economic times would not bode well for the PM.

“It is in part driven by necessity, Najib is trying to protect his current support, he can’t push for reforms at the expense of Malay support base within Umno,” Ibrahim added.

Using the recent Bersih 2.0 rally as an example, Ibrahim said Najib should have taken a more moderate position and allowed space for dissent by listening to the election watchdog.

“He has to be seen as a prime minister for all Malaysians,” said Ibrahim.

The Malaysian Insider understands that Najib has fallen out with several key advisers over the government’s security crackdown during the rally. A few liberal advisers have been sidelined while those with right-wing sentiments feel the prime minister should take a harder line.

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) academic Dr Faizal Hazis concurred with Ibrahim’s views, saying that although Najib had promised a “moderate, centrist” government administration, there was a lack of will on the part of Najib to carry through his plans.

“In trying to placate all parties, Najib is drifting away from the centre.

"There is no strong will to see the initiatives through, especially on the part of Umno," Faizal told The Malaysian Insider.

The simplest example, said the academic was Najib's refusal recently to state whether he was a proponent of his own two-year-old 1 Malaysia policy that espouses being "Malaysian first" — for fear of contradicting his deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

"Najib's response to not answering the Malaysian first question is a lame response; deep down he is facing contestation from the right-wingers within his own party and he is trying to pacify them. Perhaps Najib saw that influence on Pak Lah," Faizal said.

The political analyst said Najib needed to carry out the initiatives originally proposed under the first instalment of the NEM, as it was the reason why public support for his leadership was overwhelming at a certain point.

"That was what people saw and they supported him for. But gradually over time right-wing forces like Perkasa and within Umno have forced their hand on reform plans.

"His backtracking of the NEM, which was initially meant for all races, it does not show that he is serious about changes," he added.

The first part of the NEM was published last March and recommended major structural changes to the economy and to make affirmative action more market-friendly. But after Malay rights groups led by Perkasa railed against the initial NEM, Najib backtracked and describe the recommendations as a "trial balloon".

The second part recommended 53 key policy measures to address cross-cutting barriers for Malaysia to transform into a high-income, sustainable and inclusive economy by 2020 by developing a quality workforce, lowering dependence on foreign labour, and market-friendly affirmative action. But the bold recommendations set out in the first part of the NEM to boost competitiveness by reducing quotas were largely absent in the second part.

"His reform policies never got off the ground in the first place. They are often sabotaged or protested by vested interest parties. His landmark NEM was stillborn when key 'transformative' reforms were protested by right-wingers like Perkasa who were against the switch from New Economic Policy (NEP) quota system," DAP national publicity secretary Tony Pua told The Malaysian Insider.

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