

Najib's latest moves a sign of returning to the centre
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 16 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak's announcements last night of a select committee on electoral reform and rolling back censorship of international media are the clearest sign that he has decided to put some space between himself and hardliners in government, especially Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein.

Sources in the prime minister's camp say that Najib (picture) now realises the folly of a sledgehammer approach — one which has soiled his aim of being seen as a moderate and reformer and has caused him support of middle Malaysia.

Privately, he has blamed several ministers and aides who have been counselling tough action against Bersih 2.0 and painted an erroneous picture of some of the challenges facing his administration.

"The tough action has widened the disconnect between PM and the people, and the reality of the situation. He is taking steps to repair that damage," a source told The Malaysian Insider.

The Malaysian Insider understands that at last Wednesday's retreat involving ministers and chief ministers/mentris besar, Najib spoke about the need to understand clearly the aspirations of the people and not be dismissive of people who did not agree with the government.

Notably, many ministers stayed clear of the topic of Bersih 2.0 and electoral reform, with only Hishammuddin giving a stout defence of the police crackdown on the July 9 rally, justifying and saying it was correct.

Since the fallout of the rally, some of Najib's aides have been at pains to say that he received wrong advice from certain ministers, advice which may explain the PM's decision to rescind the stadium offer.

The Malaysian Insider understands that Najib had informed economic advisers on July 5 that the government had agreed to the stadium after the Yang di-Pertuan Agong met Bersih chairman Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan but he then inexplicably changed his mind later.

The police came down heavy on the participants of the July 9 Bersih rally in Kuala Lumpur, firing tear gas and water cannons on them. — File pic

There has been some pressure from the more conservative elements of Umno for Najib to go hard after the organisers of Bersih, and these hardliners have the support of a couple of senior Umno ministers but the PM knows that this approach will cut his support among middle-class Malays and the non-Malays even more, and reduce chances of a good win at the polls.

It is still unclear why Najib took so long to find out or decide that the hardline approach was leading him down the path of political demise.

"He was trained to be the prime minister. So it's a wonder why he was shooting himself in the foot, and even shooting himself in the head despite all the good advice he was getting," a former Umno Youth official close to Najib told The Malaysian Insider.

Given that he has flip-flopped several times in last few months, his critics will argue that the concession of a select committee on electoral reform and commitment against censorship is a strategic retreat — a few moves to buy him some respite from the daily cycle of bad news and repair his damaged image as a reformer.

It was only a few days ago that he likened the Bersih rally to the London riots, a line taken by

Hishammuddin and senior police officers to justify their lockdown of Kuala Lumpur on July 9 that turned the capital city into a ghost town.

But a close associate told The Malaysian Insider that his decision to put distance between himself and the hardliners was genuine, especially after learning that their advice was not altogether altruistic at times.

But the real test of whether Najib is committed to the middle path and reform or whether all these conciliatory moves are part of temporary charm offensive will be seen in the next few days or weeks when the likes of Perkasa and its supporters in the administration campaign for tougher action against the Bersih organisers and electoral reform.

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 poor handling of the July 9 Bersih rally are instances where the PM has been accused of placating the demands of right-wing groups as well as members within Umno.

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