

In NST, a reflection of Najib's own dilemma
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KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 16 — Malaysia's most pro-government newspaper the New Straits Times (NST) is searching for something which has been in scarce supply in recent years — credibility.

But the latest bid to reverse declining readership in the newspaper, which is controlled by Umno-linked interests, is also an extension of Datuk Seri Najib Razak's own attempt to reinvent an administration that has floundered in the past year.

The prime minister's media strategist, Abdul Jalil Hamid, was appointed this week to head the newspaper as part of moves by Umno to realign its media unit ahead of the next general election expected by early 2012.

At a meeting on Friday, Najib's latest appointee to the top position in the NST met senior editors and said that the newspaper needs to become credible.

The Malaysian Insider understands that the mood in the newsroom is one of amusement given that all new appointees have said the same thing and yet the daily has become even more one-sided in recent years.

News coverage since the Najib administration came to power has been decidedly anti-Opposition.

As a result, circulation has continued to plummet.

Circulation figures show that fewer than 70,000 copies of the newspaper are sold daily, compared to its rival The Star, which sells 247,000 copies on average, according to the latest Audit Bureau of Circulation statistics.

Overall, newspaper circulation has been falling, reflecting a global trend. But the NST's readership continues to fall at an alarming rate.

In recent months, the NST has also fallen increasingly under the influence of pro-Umno blogs, taking direction from bloggers financed by factions in the ruling party to attack political rivals.

Unverified stories that appear on Internet blogs have found their way onto the pages of the newspaper on a regular basis in much the same way that Umno's Malay daily Utusan Malaysia has operated since Najib came to power.

Abdul Jalil has not indicated yet if he intends to continue with this direction in his attempt to regain credibility.

It is understood that the general view in the newsroom is that Abdul Jalil's appointment will not have much impact because Putrajaya is uncomfortable with any balanced coverage of

political issues.

In some ways, the NST's problems mirror the Najib administration's own credibility deficit.

Last month, the prime minister pushed aside the hawks that had been dominating space in his administration by announcing plans for a raft of reforms including the repeal of the Internal Security Act (ISA).

This was seen by political observers as a bid to reclaim middle Malaysia after the disastrous handling of the July 9 Bersih rally that gained the PM and Barisan Nasional (BN) unwanted negative publicity in the international media just as he was pitching the country to foreign investors.

The reinvention of the Najib administration after it reached its nadir in the July 9 crackdown has seen him hiring a group of political strategists that include members of the team behind Tony Blair's "New Labour".

Their plan is to reinvent Najib as a moderate reformist.

As part of the Najib team's big push, it is also understood that multi-million-ringgit funding has also been worked out for a new website launched recently and the hiring of hundreds of people to promote "Brand Najib" and "Brand BN" on social media networks and other websites.

But as talk of elections grows louder, the prime minister returned to a previously reliable multi-million-ringgit vote-getting strategy when he recently unveiled a Budget full of handouts and freebies.

The Wall Street Journal said that Najib's Budget dashed expectations of economic reform needed to promote growth.

It is against this backdrop that some journalists at the NST as well as the public are viewing the latest change at the top in the newspaper that has become of a symbol of Umno's leadership.

Crucially, when Najib first took office in 2009, he had indicated to senior editors at the newspaper then that he was not a fan of his predecessor Tun Abdullah Badawi's willingness to give the NST and other newspapers more space and freedom in which to operate.

Ultimately, the NST and the government are facing the same problem.

They are looking for credibility without going the extra yard.

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