

From the people behind Tony Blair, a 'cool' Najib
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By Leslie Lau

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 19 — In the last few weeks, a group of political strategists that includes members of the team behind Tony Blair's "New Labour" have started work to reinvent Datuk Seri Najib Razak as a moderate reformist to appeal to voters as he prepares to lead his Barisan Nasional (BN) for the first time into elections.

The Malaysian Insider understands that besides the former Blair operatives, the Najib team is also seeking the counsel of a familiar face — Paul Stadlen, the former boss of APCO Malaysia, the team that met an ignominious end a few months ago for alleged links to Israel.

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 and to hire hundreds of people to promote "Brand Najib" and "Brand BN" on social media and other websites.

Najib attended Astro's Suarakami concert on Saturday night as part of his makeover. — File pic

A new Najib — one who attends concerts and speaks of being "cool" — has already emerged despite the short time the "Blair team" has been working here.

Last week, 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 BN unwanted negative publicity in the international media just as he was pitching the country to foreign investors.

Fresh from announcing his reforms, the PM told a gathering of BN parties in Selangor on Saturday that they needed to be "progressive, dynamic, cool and the party of the future."

To buff up the new cool factor he hopes to inject into his ruling coalition that is currently dominated by fusty conservatives, Najib also attended Astro's Suarakami concert on Saturday night.

The grey-haired PM took the stage to greet and charm the young concert-goers and later spent time taking and sharing photographs to his more than 200,000 followers on Twitter.

After the concert, the PM sent out this message on Twitter: "Thank u guys for all your tweets. Nice to know some of u think I am cool! Glad to know it was a great concert."

By attempting to turn Najib into a "cool" leader who is also committed to reforms, the PM's new advisers appear to be taking a leaf out of their tried and tested campaigns for the former British PM.

The election as Britain's PM of a relatively young Blair in 1997 was seen as a successful bid by his campaign to capitalise on the "Cool Britannia" era marked by a resurgence in British

pop music acts, artists and fashion.

Blair's New Labour movement that moved his party to the centre was closely associated with the "Cool Britannia" idea.

In the next few weeks, Najib's team is expected to have the PM attend symbolic events to sell the idea that he is a moderate leader for the future.

But while Najib takes the stage as a centrist, the more negative aspects of his campaign ahead of polls expected soon will be taken up by a new website and the social media team.

It is understood that the new website, which started operating recently, has secured initial funding from supporters of the PM of between RM5 million and RM10 million.

But it is unclear how much money is being spent to hire the hundreds of people whose task is to promote Najib and BN while attacking the opposition Pakatan Rakyat on Twitter, Facebook and through comments on various websites.

Najib's new team of advisers is just the latest in his administration's penchant for foreign public relations firms.

APCO's time in Malaysia was marked by controversy after the opposition alleged the public relations firm was linked to Israel.

Last month, Putrajaya was forced to end its contract with British publicity firm FBC Media after an embarrassing exposé revealed Malaysian leaders routinely appeared in paid-for interviews on global television programmes.

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