

Najib's big bet on a makeover to win votes
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 19 — By putting himself at the centre of an image makeover for his administration, Datuk Seri Najib Razak runs the risk of the campaign backfiring but could also reap huge dividends in winning over voter support if handled well, analysts and political observers said today.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia political scientist Professor Dr Shamsul Adabi Mamat said the new public relations effort showed the prime minister's commitment towards reaching out to younger voters.

"It shows that he has the people in mind and wants to get closer to Malaysians," he told The Malaysian Insider.

Monash University political analyst James Chin pointed out, however, that Najib's track record in hiring foreign strategists has been dismal.

"Every time they hire foreigners, it backfires. Many in the local media industry think that there is enough expertise locally and there is no need for Najib (picture) to hire foreigners.

"This move simply tells us the government is very worried about the perception of the people, among the voters and the international community," he said.

The Malaysian Insider reported earlier today a group of political strategists who include members of the team behind Tony Blair's "New Labour" have started work in the last few weeks to reinvent Najib as a moderate reformist to appeal to voters as he prepares to lead his Barisan Nasional (BN) for the first time into elections.

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'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. Its services were terminated earlier this year.

Last month, Putrajaya was also 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.

Last week, Najib also announced plans to repeal the Internal Security Act and other security laws in a move that could see stiff resistance from conservative elements in Umno and BN.

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng said money would be a big factor in the latest campaign.

"The most important thing is whose money is he using," he said.

"He should come clean on who is paying for the PR service."

Khoo pointed out that the Najib administration should be focusing on the economy instead of an image makeover for the PM.

"The decrease in the quality of public education, that is a prime factor for families migrating. We are losing out on affordability, quality.

"We are not anywhere near a middle-income society. These are pertinent issues. Any PR campaign cannot gloss over our under-achievements. If government is doing well, there will be no need for this," he said.

Universiti Sains Malaysia's Dr Sivamurugan Pandian told The Malaysian Insider that if the campaign goes as planned, it will be in favour of Najib, as well as BN.

"I strongly believe that it will work for him if it's done continuously, not seasonally. The entire team's image will also benefit from this. He has to influence the minds of the voters that one vote for Najib is one vote for BN. I think that's the outcome he wants to promote," he said.

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.

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

Sivamurugan argued that one of the reasons BN lost support in Elections 2008 was because of its failure to engage voters.

"This is one of the reasons where BN failed in 2008. I think he is trying to maximise on the new media especially to reach out to those who do not follow their campaigns or ceramah and would rather get the news from elsewhere."

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