

**Najib bets on civil society to boost Malay economy**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
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**By Shannon Teoh**

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 28 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak is backing a new Malay coalition to plan strategies for the community's businessmen after repeated criticisms that Putrajaya has moved at "tortoise pace" to implement pro-Bumiputera initiatives.

The prime minister will launch tomorrow the United Malay Economic Action Council (MTEM) that has now has 63 Malay economic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) including the various Malay Chambers of Commerce, whose national president will also chair the council.

The Malaysian Insider understands that among the 63 is the Malay Economic Consultative Council (Mapem), a powerful lobby group headed by Tan Sri Rozali Ismail, whose Puncak Niaga Holdings is said to be heavily involved with Umno especially in Selangor.

"I believe this is a big signal of change by Najib, to now listen to civil society on Malay economic development," said Sharizal Shaarani, who is in charge of MTEM's advocacy and media strategy.

He added "the NGOs are made up of businessmen who know the real pulse and can give timely and accurate feedback to Najib on specific strategies instead of carpet-bombing with broad strokes."

Najib said yesterday there was a need to eventually do away with Bumiputera quotas but said the government must continue to support the community's best talent to ensure a more competitive business environment.

He pointed out that the New Economic Model (NEM) promotes affirmative action based more on meritocracy, saying "we must promote the right Bumiputera".

But Putrajaya has buckled under pressure from Malay hardliners in recent months, revising pre-qualification criteria for the RM50 billion Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) megaproject and sale conditions of billion-ringgit prime land by UDA Holdings - a government agency tasked with boosting Bumiputera participation in the urban economy.

Najib, who is expected to call for general elections soon, has also intervened personally in the so-called Bumiputera Agenda, carving out for them RM8 billion or 43 per cent of civil engineering work for the MRT.

He simultaneously announced at a Bumiputera Agenda Action Council (MTAB) meeting late last month a RM2 billion facilitation fund to help kick-start Bumiputera participation in the government's 131 entry-point projects (EPP) worth RM1.4 trillion.

The Umno president has had his hands full in trying to win back middle Malaysia by speeding the pace of reforms, announcing a parliamentary select committee on electoral reforms, repealing security laws and promising greater freedom to the public.

But the Barisan Nasional (BN) chief's hold on the key Malay vote bank has been threatened by the spike in living costs as the likes of right-wing Malay group Perkasa and Mapem

continue to lobby the government for a bigger slice of the pie.

Mapem has accused Putrajaya's Bumiputera Agenda Driving Unit (Teraju) of dragging its feet in boosting the Bumiputera economy and last weekend asked that the long-standing 30 per cent Bumiputera equity target be revised to 50 per cent.

The Malaysian Insider also reported last July that BN lawmakers have told coalition leaders that the government must ensure more funds trickle down to their constituencies — instead of concentrating on big-ticket projects like the Klang Valley Mass Rapid Transit (MRT).

Sharizal said MTEM would "devise strategies to create opportunities for Malay entrepreneurs, especially SMEs, and ensure they are not losing ground."

He added that the council is targeting membership of "100 organisations and a million members" to help create awareness of economic opportunities for Malay businesses.

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