

WSJ urges Najib to 'double down' on reforms to win general election
The Malaysian Insider
September 28, 2011
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 28 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak must shed his flip-flop image and commit to reforms if he intends to carry Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN) to victory in the next general election, the Wall Street Journal has said.

The influential newspaper said Najib's transformation gambit will fail if his reforms appear insincere, pointing out that Malaysians may then suspect that the first-term prime minister "will revert to defending the prerogatives of his party's elite" once he secures a fresh mandate.

"Mr Najib continues to tack back and forth, and just last week the government charged an opposition politician with criminal defamation.

"But this risks pleasing nobody. He stands a better chance if he doubles down on reform," it said in an opinion piece today.

The Wall Street Journal said Najib's harsh clampdown on the July 9 Bersih rally for free elections was the most recent cause for persistent public scepticism, noting that the prime minister has defended the police for treating the illegal but peaceful protest "as if it were another insurgency".

This alienated middle Malaysia at a time when Umno can no longer rely on the rural Malay heartland as a vote bank given that the urban population was now 72 per cent of the population, the paper said.

It added that the increasingly younger electorate could no longer recall the poverty and racial violence that created the desire for a paternalistic government that "stomped on populist passions".

The Wall Street Journal also identified hardliners within Umno itself as the greatest threat to Najib's bold reform intentions, citing "inflammatory" statements made by party leaders on ethnic minorities and defending special privileges for Bumiputeras.

"Former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi has warned that these elements will try to stop the repeal of the ISA (Internal Security Act) and other laws that underpin their power," it said.

The paper stressed that the only way for Umno to win elections and keep control of state funds was to "move with the times on the rule of law" and suggested that Najib renounce control of the media and accede to Bersih's demands to restore trust in government and boost BN's image.

"Opposition figures tell us that it's unlikely they can defeat Mr Najib in next year's election, and so he remains the best hope for political reform in the next few years," it said.

"He may have shown his true colours, but his gambit to transform Umno won't work if he goes halfway."

The Malaysian Insider

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