

Hudud row a boon for Najib, says WSJ
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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 6 — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak should thank his political foes for resurrecting the hudud issue, according to the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) Online, which called it a timely boost to his sliding popularity as national polls loom

“Malaysian leader Najib Razak’s effort to reinvent himself as the country’s ‘coolest’ prime minister is getting a bit of a lift from a row in the opposition over unfashionable Islamic hudud laws,” the influential US daily said today.

It observed the DAP-PAS-PKR alliance was now tangled in regular debate over the enforcement of Islamic penal laws in multi-religious Malaysia, handing the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) a much-needed edge to claw back support ahead of an expected early 13th general election.

The Chinese-majority DAP last week pledged that its leadership would resign en masse if hudud laws are implemented, after Islamist partner PAS’s spiritual advisor Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat told reporters the party would seek to adopt the Islamic penal laws nationwide if it wins in the coming polls.

This forced Pakatan Rakyat (PR) head and PKR advisor Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to mediate between the two and calm public opinion.

Anwar has said the opposition will not necessarily carry out hudud if it takes over Putrajaya.

“The net result of all this wrangling, political analysts say, is to do Mr Najib a favour at a time when he is trying to reclaim the centre-ground of Malaysian politics,” WSJ writer James Hookway wrote in the article headlined, “Malaysia’s Recurring Row Over Islamic laws Could Lift Najib”.

“That left Mr Najib largely free to focus on preparing a budget speech due Friday (tomorrow) that many analysts expect to contain a series of cash giveaways, such as tax rebates, civil services bonuses and lower personal tax rates, in the run-up to national elections that must be held within the next 18 months,” he added.

The prime minister is expected to roll out a populist Budget to combat the rising cost of living before calling for an early general election next year, ahead of the 2013 expiry of the BN mandate.

The global economy is forecast to turn gloomier, which could deal a death blow to the Najib administration if it chooses to see out its mandate to full term.

The government’s subsidy bill doubled to RM22 billion despite price hikes to basic goods such as fuel, electricity and sugar earlier this year.

The Najib administration is seen to be struggling to regain popular support even as it tries to ensure that the deficit, which hit a two-decade peak of over seven per cent in 2009,

would be kept under 5.4 per cent this year.

But Hookway also observed that the hudud issue is a “double-edged sword” for Najib because the latter is a Muslim and the BN lynchpin, Umno, has been growing increasingly vocal in championing the religious rights of the Malays, who must also be Muslim as defined by the Federal Constitution.

“Somebody might ask where he stands on hudud laws.”

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