

**Najib must balance rural-urban demands to win polls, says FT**  
**The Malaysian Insider**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 8 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak must assure rural Malays they can still depend on government aid despite his promised reforms to reclaim middle ground before an election expected soon, said the Financial Times (FT).

The influential business newspaper said yesterday the prime minister needs to strike a balance between rural Malays and urban Malaysians of all races who it said prefer economic and political reform.

The paper's Asian correspondent Kevin Brown noted that Najib's popularity has seen stark improvement following his series of economic and civil liberties reform initiatives, including the proposed repeal and amendments to several press and security laws.

"To be sure of winning, though, Najib must reassure rural and less well off Malay voters that they can continue to depend on government assistance and positive discrimination.

"But the government also angered many Malaysians by its suppression of a peaceful march for electoral reform in the summer," he said, referring to Bersih 2.0's July 9 rally for free and fair elections.

Shortly after the tumultuous rally, Najib mooted reforms to the electoral process and Parliament had on Monday moved to form a bi-partisan select committee tasked to look into the matter.

Brown also appeared to discount the Najib administration's denial that last night's Budget 2012 was tailored for an election speculated to be called within months.

He pointed out that when the "middle-aged prime minister" decided recently to don cycling gear at a rally in Penang, it was reasonable to assume that an election is in the offing.

But, he added, any doubt that the Barisan Nasional (BN) government is gearing up for snap polls within months disappeared last night when Najib tabled Budget 2012 in Parliament.

The prime minister's pledges, said Brown, was clearly aimed at shoring up the coalition's core support from the civil service and the Malay community ahead of the crucial 13th general election.

"The budget offered... a gamut of incentives to strengthen the economy, including an RM6 billion stimulus package," he wrote.

He pointed out that Najib had also announced cash handouts to a majority of Malaysians, bonuses to the country's 1.3 million civil servants and increases in their wages and pensions.

The civil service, added Brown, was considered a "core constituency for the governing coalition and its dominant party, Mr Najib's United Malays National Organisation (Umno)."

"It is a roller coaster in Malaysian politics right now, and Najib's star is rising a bit," Brown quoted Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia specialist at Singapore Management University as saying. "But a lot of it is based on promises rather than delivery."

Brown also cautioned against the government's growth projection of 5-6 per cent for 2012, saying a significant slowdown could threaten BN's prospects in the election, which must be called by 2013.

Earlier today, Najib moved to quell concerns raised by economists over his government's growth projection for 2012, saying a continued strong domestic demand and the restructuring of Malaysia's total trade would help achieve the 5-6 per cent target.

The prime minister however admitted that a sudden sharp global downturn would affect his forecast.

"At this moment, we think we can still achieve the 5-6 per cent target because of strong domestic demand and the fact that we have restructured our total trade.

"But of course there is one caveat — if there is a sharp downturn, that is a different story... (for) the whole world, without exception," he told a press conference after a meet-and-greet session with over 2,000 residents at SJK (C) Kundang.

In his speech yesterday, Najib had promised cash handouts, more money for civil servants, schools and a fund for "high-impact development" projects as part of his Budget 2012 measures to put cash in the pockets of voters ahead of a general election expected soon.

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