

Najib vows to address Indian 'legacy issues'
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By Shannon Teoh



Najib (centre) attends the launch of the Temple of Fine Arts new RM20 million building.
— Picture by Jack Ooi

KUALA LUMPUR, July 4 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak called on the Indian community today to give Barisan Nasional (BN) another chance, promising to overcome “legacy issues and contemporary challenges” to the ethnic group that makes up just under 10 per cent of the population.

Speaking at the launch of the Indian community theatre house Temple of Fine Arts’ new RM20 million building, the recipient of a RM3 million federal grant, the prime minister made a specific reference to the “heroism, hardship and sacrifice” of Indians in Malaysia.

The BN chief said this despite the presence of Ministerial Envoy to India and South Asia Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu.

Samy’s 27 years as MIC president was seen by some quarters as a symbol of the BN administration’s failure to address Indian issues, which birthed Indian civil rights movement Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) ahead of Election 2008.

Hindraf organised a mass rally of up to 30,000 protestors in late 2007 that was dispersed by police with tear gas and water cannons, building momentum towards the March polls where analysts said close to 80 per cent of Indians turned their backs on BN.

But Indian support in recent by-elections appears to have trickled back to the ruling coalition, while Samy Vellu also finally released the reins of MIC last December.

“The government is actively engaging the community... we are entirely committed to increasing the pace of delivery... geared towards both addressing legacy issues and overcoming contemporary challenges,” he said just a stone’s throw from the federal government’s RM35 million Little India redevelopment of Brickfields, an Indian enclave here in the city.

The project was launched last November by Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh amid much fanfare, but earlier this year, traders in the area complained of rising rent but falling sales due to worsening traffic congestion.

Najib used his speech at today's event to call for Indians to rally behind "political and community leaders to deliver a brighter future. To build this trust, government and community leaders from the Indian society must work together."

He added that this government-community collaboration would document "Indians who sacrificed much in building Malaysia, who despite all odds have made real advances."

According to MIC deputy president Datuk S. Subramaniam, Najib said he will consider further assistance to the Temple of Fine Arts as it seeks to raise another RM10 million outstanding from the cost of constructing its new premises.

Najib is expected to call a general election within the year to secure his own mandate but is said to require an improvement over BN's performance in 2008 to remain in office.

BN suffered its worst showing ever in a federal election when it ceded five states and 82 parliamentary seats in the 12th General Election, and observers say that only a return of the ruling coalition's two-thirds of Parliament can guarantee Najib's survival.

As Chinese voters appear to be firmly behind the opposition, the return of Indian support will help to tip the scales in favour of BN who still hold the edge among the Malay electorate.

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