

Najib eyes snap polls, to review final BN candidates list
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 10 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak is looking at snap polls in the first half of the year, directing all Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders to finalise their candidates list but saying he will have the last word on the choices from the 13-member ruling coalition to ensure a victory, sources said.

The Malaysian Insider understands that the prime minister told his ministers he wanted the headline-grabbing National Feedlot Centre (NFC) and Malaysia Airlines (MAS) issues settled soon before calling a snap election.

Najib wants several headline-grabbing issues settled before call a snap election. This could mean that Najib might not renew Wanita Umno chief Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil's senatorship after April 8 and end her ministerial career as her family runs the NFC which has seen almost daily exposes of a luxury property spending spree. The Malaysian Insider reported yesterday that the prime minister was reviewing the MAS-AirAsia share swap done last August that has yet to show any promised results.

"This looks like the last lap for BN before a general election is called. Najib has told BN leaders he will be the final arbiter of all lists, including theirs," a coalition source told The Malaysian Insider.

Each party in the 13-member BN normally hands a list that is approved by the chairman but Najib has been stressing on putting up "winnable candidates" or rather, winning candidates who can retain and regain seats in the 222-seat Parliament and the states now under Pakatan Rakyat (PR) rule — Kedah, Kelantan, Penang and Selangor.

There has been concern that some component party leaders might exclude popular politicians who could be detrimental to BN's chances of regaining its two-thirds parliamentary majority lost in Election 2008.

"Najib has two passing marks, one is to get at least Pak Lah's 140 seats won in Election 2008 and the second is to get back the two-thirds majority," the source added, referring to Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's size of victory in the March 8, 2008 election.

But a major concern for the first-term prime minister is the number of issues hurting his coalition on the ground despite a concerted effort to win over voters with a number of economic initiatives.

The NFC controversy has been topping the headlines in online portals and opposition newspapers with details of a RM250 million government soft loan for the national cattle-farming project being used to finance a restaurant chain, luxury condominiums in and outside Malaysia. Shahrizat's family have denied any wrongdoing while the police have recommended action for criminal breach of trust.

However, the Attorney-General has handed back the files to the police for further investigations while Shahrizat has sued opposition leaders who say she had a hand in awarding the project to her family. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) is investigating her involvement in the issue but has yet to announce any results.

Najib has said that Shahrizat's position in his Cabinet is his prerogative when replying to calls to drop her, including from influential former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and several other Umno leaders who say the issue is a cause of concern.

"It is hard for us to explain the issue to the people when we go to the ground. They want to know why her family can get RM250 million but they can't even get a small loan from the banks to expand their farms or business," an Umno warlord told The Malaysian Insider.

It is learnt that Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Mansor got an earful from Johor Umno last week when he went to see them about poll preparations. Leaders from the Umno birthplace told him that they were concerned by the number of issues generated by Putrajaya and top Umno leaders.

"NFC is already an issue and now we have Kidex. How do we explain this to people who perceive Umno as a money-making machine?" a Johor Umno leader asked, referring to the RM2.2 billion Kinrara-Damansara highway concession awarded to an Umno lawyer in partnership with the wife of ex-Chief Justice Tun Zaki Azmi.

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A Sabah Umno leader also told The Malaysian Insider he supported Najib's move to review the MAS-AirAsia deal as it had already upset the country's most eastern state with its route cuts to Kota Kinabalu.

"I know MAS is looking at costs but it has to control its procurements and wage bill before cutting routes that is our tourism lifeline," he said, referring to the flag carrier's route rationalisation programme in the past six months that has seen fewer flights to the state capital.

Najib has begun solving some of the major issues plaguing his administration, including averting a backlash from civil servants when he reinstated the old pay scheme with some improvements after complaints that the New Remuneration Scheme (NRS) favoured top officials rather than the majority of the 1.3 million-strong civil service.

Last night, he promised a solution within two weeks to those not using Johor Baru's Eastern Dispersal Link (EDL) but are being forced to pay the RM9.10 toll when crossing from the Causeway to the immigration complex.

In a boost to his confidence, a recent polls showed that Najib's approval rating has surged by 10 percentage points to 69 per cent on the back of an improving economy and the cash handout of RM500 to low-income earners under the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M).

Pollsters Merdeka Center found that the prime minister's support was highest among households earning less than RM1,500 a month at 78 per cent, with four-fifths of Indians and 74 per cent of Malays also giving Najib the thumbs up.

But less than half of the 1,022 voters polled in Peninsular Malaysia last month said “they were happy with the government.”

The Umno president’s popularity had been on a steady decline since hitting a peak of 72 per cent in May 2010, dropping to 69 per cent in November the same year before sliding to 59 per cent in August 2011.

Malaysia’s economy had recovered from a slight contraction in 2009 to record a 7.2 per cent expansion in 2010 before growth slowed again last year.

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