

As polls window narrows, top government officers bat for BN
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, June 28 — The spate of statements by senior government officers backing the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) is piling as Datuk Seri Najib Razak seeks a big win in a general election he must call within a year despite his coalition inching to gain public approval.

The newly appointed Chief Secretary to the Government called on his new charges on Sunday to be loyal to the government and ignore the opposition's "empty promises" while a senior diplomat attacked a Canadian newspaper this week for questioning Najib's "impressive track record."

The 1.4-million-strong public sector has been a traditional vote bank for BN but controversy over a new pay scheme and attacks on the ruling parties from Pakatan Rakyat (PR) over bread-and-butter issues have given the opposition hope of swinging the civil service over.

Although the prime minister's popularity rating in Peninsular Malaysia dropped by four percentage points after violent clashes between police and protestors at the April 28 Bersih rally it still remains at 65 per cent, while his government has been unable to breach the 50 per cent mark.

Analysts told The Malaysian Insider that with the political contest stiffer than ever, the public sector's confidence in the political leadership has been shaken.

They said issues such as the alleged abuse of a RM250 million federal loan by a then Cabinet minister's family, a higher education loan scheme said to saddle students with debt and claims of kickbacks in the RM7 billion purchase of Scorpene submarines linked to Najib weighed heavily among voters.

"Despite obvious advantages to BN, Najib has delayed polls to a point where he has a very narrow window left. The net effect of these issues and an 'uneven' handling from his administration has resulted in a lot of new tactics coming to play.

"So (civil servants) are seeing subtle and not-so-subtle reminders from their senior colleagues to 'vote the right way'," said Ibrahim Suffian who heads opinion researchers Merdeka Center.

Independent political analyst Khoo Kay Peng sees a "cohesive strategy to win over the middle ground" by talking up the "certainty that comes with a BN government."

Making references to Najib's "Janji Ditepati (Promises Fulfilled)" campaign, which is now also the theme for upcoming National Day celebrations, he said that "with hard times coming, there are many who will want to take care of their rice bowl and not make their bosses look bad."

Chief Secretary Datuk Seri Ali Hamsa had said civil servants "should know better" than to believe "empty promises" from the opposition, calling them to "serve the government of the day" in an interview published by the New Sunday Times.

Foreign Ministry undersecretary Ahmad Rozian Abdul Ghani then attacked a Canadian newspaper yesterday for describing Najib as a "false democrat," insisting the prime minister had "an impressive track record by anyone's standards."

"While the prime minister takes nothing for granted, he hopes he will be given a mandate to continue Malaysia's transformation," the diplomat added.

A director at Putrajaya's efficiency unit PEMANDU also made a public attack on PR yesterday for not improving the states it governs and focusing on sniping and criticising the federal government's efforts.

"All oppos do is snipe & critic wot is being done but not focused on improving their states! Wot hv they done??" communications director Alex Iskandar Liew said on his public account on micro-blogging site Twitter, copying @barisannasional and @NRC11, a fan club dedicated to the prime minister.

Political science lecturer James Chin refused to single out any act of impartiality by government officials but said that "by convention and in the government's General Orders, civil servants cannot make any political statement."

"Politics must be handled by political appointees such as political or press secretaries who are on contract and not governed by the Public Service Department," he said.

The Chief Secretary is the country's top government servant while undersecretaries are the top level of civil service in a ministry. Most PEMANDU employees, however, are hired on a contract basis.

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