

Umno-BN biggest loser if Najib's reform agenda fails
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KUALA LUMPUR, July 13 — Umno and the Barisan Nasional (BN) stand to lose the most at the polls if hawks within the ruling establishment continue to oppose Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's reform agenda, a political scientist has said in remarks published today in Singapore.

Najib, who took over office from Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2009 and is seeking a personal mandate in the 13th general election due soon, seems to be up against "institutional inertia" in getting backing for his 1 Malaysia ideology and reform policies, Farish A. Noor said in an opinion piece published today in Singapore daily Straits Times.

Najib is facing strong resistance in carrying out his reforms from certain leaders within his party and from the country's 1.4 million civil servants.

"As a transformer, his biggest challenge is the institutional inertia he has to overcome, from vested interests in the public sector as well as his own political party and coalition," said the Penang-born political analyst, a senior fellow at Singapore's famed S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Farish noted recent surveys have shown that Najib scored high on the popularity chart with his government, economic, social and legislative transformation plans under his 1 Malaysia banner but continued to face strong resistance in carrying them out from certain leaders within his party and from the country's 1.4 million civil servants who have traditionally been a reliable vote bank.

"Yet as the anti-reform forces in the country continue to criticise him for his transformation efforts, it is the opposition that benefits more, for it lends the impression that Mr Najib is not able to hold his fort together," he said in the article titled "1 Malaysia, many challenges".

Farish said that if the situation continued unchanged, Najib's transformation agenda may be derailed and he could end up suffering a similar fate to Abdullah who saw his Islam Hadari (civilisational Islam) project scuppered.

"In such a situation, however, the biggest loser will be Umno and the BN themselves, who cannot afford to lose support at the coming general election.

"They will have to secure at least a marginal increase in seats gained at both the federal and state level," Farish said.

Najib has been carrying out a raft of reforms to open up Malaysia's economy in a bid to push the country out of the middle-income trap by 2020 and has also sped up a series of legislative changes since last year.

Two days ago, he announced his plan to repeal the Sedition Act 1948 and replace it with a National Harmony Act, in his latest move to regain the momentum for reforms ahead of elections that must be held soon.

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