

Najib's turn at Google Hangout, aims for cyber-savvy crowd
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KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 20 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak will host a Google Hangout on September 29, becoming the second Malaysian politician to connect with IT-savvy Malaysians especially youths who form a distinct demographic of the 13 million eligible to vote in the next general election.

The Malaysian Insider understands that the prime minister will answer questions in the hour-long session in the online forum from 4pm that Saturday, a day after he tables the Budget 2013 proposals in Parliament. The budget is the last one before elections that must be called by middle 2013.

"Datuk Seri Najib is having a Google Hangout on September 29 at 4pm and this will add to other efforts in cyberspace," a source told The Malaysian Insider.

It is learnt that his communication team is working on the details of the Google Hangout and an advertising campaign to promote the event, which will centre on the government's efforts to develop the country into a high-income developed nation by 2020. It is also understood that Najib, who is finance minister, will also answer questions about the Budget 2013 proposals.

The Google Hangout comes at a time when the Malaysian authorities lodged an official complaint to Google and its video-sharing site YouTube about the anti-Islam film clip "Innocence of Muslims" which is seen as denigrating Prophet Muhammad and the faith, which is the country's official religion.

YouTube has blocked access to the video clip from Malaysian Internet Protocol (IP) addresses but other services remain. The video-sharing site is popular in Malaysia and is mainly used by opposition politicians who want to bypass local free-to-air television stations which are either run by the state or by pro-government owners.

Najib's main political foe, Opposition Leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, was the first politician in the country to hold a Google Hangout, which allows virtual meetings of up to 10 people or a broadcast to an online audience of millions. Anwar's event drew thousands when it was held on August 17, two days before the Eid festival when Malaysian Muslims return home to celebrate the end of the holy Ramadan fasting month.

US President Barack Obama hosted a Google Hangout last January as part of his re-election campaign. The forum comes in the form of live video connections and video YouTube questions.

Najib, who will seek his own mandate in the next polls, is one of the country's most popular politicians online through his blog www.1malaysia.com.my, his two Facebook accounts and his Twitter microblogging account.

His main Facebook page has 1,181,087 likes against Anwar's 388,219 likes in a country which has some 12.9 million Facebook accounts.

On Twitter, Najib has 883,418 followers while the PKR de facto leader has about a sixth of that at 192,530 followers. But Anwar is active on Twitter with nearly nine times more tweets than Najib. Both have also organised tweet-ups or meetings with their followers in Kuala Lumpur in what is seen as an attempt to reach out and engage those who shun the mainstream media.

Putrajaya's push for greater Internet coverage has seen the broadband penetration rate for households rising to 62.9 per cent in the first quarter of this year from 62.3 per cent in 2011, said the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) last month. Malaysia has about 6.69 million households.

The Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition pact has always been seen as having the upper hand in cyberspace presence over Barisan Nasional (BN), but in recent months the ruling coalition has expanded its online presence with several pro-BN news portals and a rising number of supporters taking to Twitter.

Despite the increased presence, a pro-BN campaign called "I Choose Malaysia" has been dominating the airwaves and prime advertising space in state and private television stations as well as newspapers controlled by Umno and the MCA. The campaign features quotes from government companies' chief executives and pro-government bloggers and aims for those who do not have access to cyberspace.

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