

Najib leaves Taib video expose to MACC probe
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 27 — Barisan Nasional (BN) is “equally as concerned about corruption” as its critics but the problem cannot go away overnight, Datuk Seri Najib Razak said in a Financial Times (FT) interview carried today, in the wake of a damning expose on Sarawak’s timber scandals.

The international financial daily reported that the prime minister declined to address the expose by Global Witness (GW) directly during the interview, pointing out that Malaysian graftbusters were already investigating the allegations against Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud.

“Prostitution and corruption are two things that mankind has had to live with for so long. But we are determined to tackle it. It is a scourge. But it is something that will not go away overnight,” he was quoted saying.

In the article describing the likely heated contest that Najib will face in Election 2013, FT noted that Umno is vulnerable on the topic of corruption, which the federal opposition will use as its key weapon on the campaign trail.

The business paper pointed to the numerous allegations of bribes allegedly used to secure government contracts, and Malaysia’s ranking of 54 out of 176 countries in Transparency International Malaysia’s (TI-M) 2012 corruption perception index.

Najib’s pledge to transform and reform the country includes promises to stamp out corruption and be more transparent, but the series of graft exposes involving administrators in his team has continued to hamper progress.

In the latest revelation by London-based environmental group Global Witness, Taib found himself at the centre of corruption allegations again in a video of a covert investigation on Sarawak’s timber scandals.

The video, titled “Inside Malaysia’s Shadow State”, showed dealings by GW’s undercover investigators with Taib’s cousins and several other intermediaries to acquire thousands of hectares of forest land, which the group said would displace thousands of indigenous people living there.

Taib has since played innocent and denied his involvement, and his government has even initiated its own probe to determine if the video was an attempt by the opposition to discredit him ahead of Election 2013, a contest deemed the most critical yet for the ruling BN coalition.

FT said Najib’s team could well be upstaged by Pakatan Rakyat (PR), the loose coalition of opposition parties PKR, DAP and PAS that has grown significantly in strength and in numbers since its harried formation five years ago.

PR had a taste of victory in the last March 2008 general election when it robbed BN of its two-thirds parliamentary majority and won in five states and a federal territory.

Should Najib lead BN to only a narrow win in the next election, the country’s sixth prime minister could face a leadership challenge within Umno.

But Najib appeared to acknowledge this during the interview, pointing out that he had allowed himself the risk when he changed Umno’s constitution to make it easier to challenge the party’s leadership.

“I’ve made Umno more democratic, more inclusive. Of course, by doing that I’m putting myself at risk. But I believe that what were doing is good for the country and good for the party,” he was quoted saying. Economy-wise, FT wrote that Najib has the advantage of incumbency as he led Malaysia through an

economic performance last year that, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), had “surpassed expectations”.

The paper pointed out that the Malaysian economy grew 5.6 per cent, driven by a robust domestic demand and exports of commodities like gas and palm oil.

Citing HSBC, FT noted that foreign confidence in Najib’s reforms has also seen foreign holdings of Malaysian government bonds soar by 550 per cent to RM215 billion since 2009.

But the paper pointed to concerns all around over the government’s debt to GDP ratio of 51 per cent, and noted that government revenues were weak.

Responding to this, Najib said his government will look at widening the tax base, appearing to hint that once polls are done, the highly-awaited goods and services tax may be introduced, after it was shelved following public uproar.

“I will look at the tax structure, definitely, because we need to enhance the revenue base. The government revenue base has to be predicated on a much stronger footing,” he was quoted saying.

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