

**BN banks on 'Brand Najib' to sway fence-sitters**  
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 1 — Barisan Nasional (BN) is tapping every ounce of chairman Datuk Seri Najib Razak's personal popularity in Election 2013, hoping his allure will win over voters still undecided ahead of the May 5 polls

His likeness dominates BN campaign material nationwide, and is given equal or even higher billing than the candidates' own promotional items in the individual constituencies.

According to The Straits Times, "Brand Najib" has become a defining feature of this closely fought election as BN, its image tarred by mismanagement and corruption scandals, seeks to shore up its image.

BN strategists believe it will win over fence-sitters who like Najib's leadership style but are hesitant about voting for BN, the Singapore newspaper reported.

Najib's popularity continues to outstrip BN's. The latest survey by the independent Merdeka Center in February puts his personal approval at 61 per cent, above BN's 45 per cent.

Since coming into office in 2009, Najib has seen his popularity climb from a low of 45 per cent to as high as 69 per cent, due largely to reforms to the public service, economy, political space and social harmony.

This has led Najib and BN to attempt a presidential-style election campaign despite the country's Westminster parliamentary democracy system in which the electorate does not directly vote for a prime minister.

But pollsters Merdeka Center cautioned that the strategy may not be without flaws, saying that Najib's personal popularity might not necessarily translate to a big win in the May 5 polls.

"There is a lot of expectation, hope riding on him ... The slight problem for the government is that it is a parliamentary system. You are not voting for a president but you are voting for the parties," Merdeka Center's executive director Ibrahim Suffian said in the "101 East" talk show hosted by international news channel Aljazeera last month.

Under the Westminster system, the triumphant party or coalition is the one who appoints the prime minister. In BN's case, the prime minister is traditionally the president of the dominant Umno.

Last month, The Malaysian Insider reported Najib took a leaf out of US President Barack Obama's first presidential campaign in 2008 by appealing directly to first-time Malaysian voters with an "Action Kit" sporting a "We support Najib Razak" slogan.

Najib's presidential tone ahead of GE13 has also been apparent with his "State of the Union" address — similar to the US — when he announced last month his government's report card and achievements under the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) and Government Transformation Programme (GTP).

Najib has been criss-crossing Malaysia and campaigning non-stop. He was in Penang yesterday and will be in Terengganu today.

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