

Najib's job expected to be safe even if BN does not improve in GE13
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 23 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak's 2009 move to open up Umno's leadership selection will likely secure his future as prime minister even if Barisan Nasional (BN) fails to do better in the May 5 general election, Bloomberg reported today.

The rule change, aimed to stop any one Umno leader from buying votes to boost support within the party, increased by 60-fold the pool of members in choosing their head.

It also allows the 59-year-old to bypass any party insiders who seek his ouster if the 13-party BN wins by a narrower margin in Election 2013, the international business news wire reported, citing analysts and Umno politicians.

"Because of the opening up of the party election process to a larger number of voters, the personal popularity of a particular candidate becomes even more influential," Joseph Chinyong Liow was quoted as saying.

"This might translate into support within Umno if his position is under threat," the associate dean of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore told Bloomberg.

Najib's predecessor, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was pressured into resigning from office following the BN's dismal showing in the 2008 polls which lost the ruling coalition its two-thirds parliamentary supermajority and five states.

Najib's deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, had started the move against Abdullah, Bloomberg reported Umno supreme council member Saifuddin Abdullah as saying.

But the deputy minister of higher education was also reported as saying Muhyiddin was unlikely to repeat the ouster move as Najib's position is stronger than Abdullah's.

"I don't expect Muhyiddin to do it again against Najib.

"Even if he does this time, Najib is in a stronger position compared to Abdullah. We have lowered the bar. If we don't get a two-thirds majority this time around it's not unexpected, so the sentiment will be different," Saifuddin was quoted as telling Bloomberg last month.

Najib's personal ratings have been consistently higher than his BN government's since he took office in April 2009. He rated 61 per cent against the BN's 48 per cent over the past year, according to independent pollster Merdeka Center's survey conducted between January 23 and February 6.

The sixth prime minister, who is seeking a personal mandate this round, also has the backing of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister whose influence within Umno remains strong.

But opinions varied over Najib's political survival post-polls.

Bloomberg reported Anand Pathmakanthan, head of research at CLSA Asia Pacific Markets, as saying a better performance for Umno would cement Najib's position as leader regardless of how its BN partners performed.

"If that didn't happen, you'd have follow-on speculation of a leadership challenge running up to the Umno general assembly in the fourth quarter.

"That will do the markets no favours," Anand was quoted as saying.

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