

Curb racism, reform electoral system for 'national reconciliation', say analysts
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 9 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak must curb racist elements within Umno and reform the electoral system if the prime minister is serious about "national reconciliation" after the polarising Election 2013, say analysts.

They agreed Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders sparked controversy by attributing the election results wholly to a "Chinese tsunami" the coalition in the same breath as Najib's promise for "national reconciliation", but said it was not too late to make good on the pledge.

"I think he needs to cool down the temperature in the country and put the fear of the law into people who are inflaming racial sentiments," Ibrahim Suffian, director of the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, told The Malaysian Insider.

Ibrahim says Najib needs to put the fear of the law into people who are inflaming racial sentiments. Political analysts have disagreed with BN, saying despite the increase in Chinese support for Pakatan Rakyat (PR), the political trend had also swept with it "large numbers of the Malays", many among them forming part of the country's middle- to upper-class voters.

"He needs to curb racist elements from coming forth, especially the newspapers," said the respected pollster, referring to official media that have been allegedly fanning the flames by blaming the Chinese for BN's dismal showing in the election outcome.

Umno newspaper Utusan Malaysia came under fire for publishing on its front page on Tuesday an article headlined "Apa lagi Cina mahu? (What else do the Chinese want?)" , a phrase which has turned viral on the Internet's social sphere.

However, analysts said that this would only be a band aid, and more must be done to make "national reconciliation" a reality in the longer term.

"For his 'national reconciliation' to work, he needs to shut down the National Civics Bureau (BTN) and change the senior staff of Utusan Malaysia as well as retire Dr Mahathir fully," said Centre for Policy Initiatives (CPI) director Dr Lim Teck Ghee.

He was referring in the latter to former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who continues to be perceived as Umno's ringmaster despite Najib being president, and has been steadily adding fuel to the fire by accusing the DAP's Lim Kit Siang of inciting the Chinese to hate the Malays.

Lim says Najib needs to shut down the National Civics Bureau (BTN) and retire Dr Mahathir fully. "I think top BN leaders should take the lead in this and the official media should toe the line. Also the civil service has a big role to play. Many discriminatory policies are initiated by civil servants holding on to the BTN concept of national unity and ketuanan Melayu," Lim said.

BTN is a government agency purportedly established to train future leaders in developing the nation but has been accused of explicitly promoting BN and the "special position" of the Malays, which has led the Selangor and Penang state governments to ban its civil servants from attending its programmes.

"The prime minister needs to disassociate himself from groups of specific ethnicity like Perkasa," said Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS).

Najib had fielded Perkasa vice-president Datuk Zulkifli Noordin in the Shah Alam federal seat, and quietly allowed Perkasa president Datuk Ibrahim Ali to contest independently in a straight fight against the opposition candidate by omitting to field its own in Pasir Mas, moves seen to support the hardline Islamist group of whom Dr Mahathir is a patron.

More importantly, analysts said, the political landscape needs to be changed so that race-based parties would cease to exist.

"If we genuinely want to move forward to a two-party system, then BN needs to be collapsed into one party, and the same goes with PR. Then we can really sit down and talk about the issues that affect people across ethnic and religious identification," said Dr Faisal Hazi, a political scientist from University Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas).

Ramon says Najib should look into the present gerrymandering and delineation of constituencies. Wan Saiful shared his view, saying: "Najib should push for a greater number of people to join BN as a direct member. As long as there are ethnic-based parties, it is in their interests to keep us divided."

Tan Sri Dr Ramon Navaratnam, chairman of the Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS), also said that the government must introduce structural electoral reforms that go to the root of the system's problems.

Despite PR winning of the popular vote at 51.4 per cent over BN's 48.6 per cent, the outcome of the election did not reflect the will of the majority as the opposition coalition still lost the federal government to BN.

"This is a very serious problem we are facing for the first time, so Najib must come out with a promise that the present gerrymandering and delineation of constituencies must be thoroughly reviewed and revised," Ramon said.

He added that the allegations of electoral roll irregularities, phantom voters, and the ineffective "indelible ink" are all important but "peripheral" when compared to the matter of gerrymandering which, he said, has fundamentally created an uneven playing field for the opposition.

Ooi Kee Beng, the deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore, added that the electoral registration process must be streamlined to avoid irregularities in the electoral roll, and that the Election Commission (EC) should be reformed to facilitate transparency and due process.

"The electoral system has to be reformed thoroughly, or Malaysia will suffer a severe trust deficit between the government and the people," he said.

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