

Is Najib the self-styled reformer falling to the right?

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It is election season in Umno and president Datuk Seri Najib Razak, it seems, has to pander to the right-wing elements within his Malay party.

The clearest sign that the hardliners have a firm grip on Najib, who was returned unopposed for a second term last Sunday, was in the contentious amendments to the Prevention of Crime Act (PCA) which, if passed, critics said would make the PCA mirror the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA).

The ISA and a raft of preventive laws were repealed by Putrajaya in the past two years in line with Najib's self-styled image as a moderate and a reformer.

He had said previously that he would not succumb to pressure to reinstate powers to detain individuals without trial.

"We are doing our best to find a good balance to ensure that human rights are not affected but to defend public interests as well. This is what is needed for a more matured society," he was quoted as saying.

Conservative forces within Umno, especially those linked to influential former president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, have resisted change and pushed for a more Malay-centric platform. And on Wednesday, it looked as though Najib had given in to their demands.

"Najib is succumbing to right-wing pressure within his party because it is crucial for him in the coming polls to get his people in and maintain his strength.

"The focus is not on Malaysians, but on the Umno polls," said PKR vice-president N. Surendran, who is a critic of the proposed changes to the PCA.

Describing the amendments as the "biggest democracy drawback" in the last 10 years, DAP strategist Liew Chin Tong said Najib seemed to be running around blindly.

"He has no idea which way to go. I think the police dictated the terms and he is just responding to them and to the right-wing elements within his party. There does not seem to be much thought put into this," said Liew.

However, Universiti Putra Malaysia political analyst Dr Jayum Jawan said there is hope yet for Najib to counter the perception that he is being controlled by the right wing in Umno.

"He must ensure that the new law is not used against his political opponents," said Jayum.

"If he allows that, it will hamper democracy and this will backfire on him."

Although opposition lawmakers and civil society are right to be fearful that the PCA can be used against them, Jayum is confident that the government will be more careful now.

"The era of the ISA is definitely over, where the law was used to detain political opponents."

International Islamic University Malaysia academic Datuk Seri Dr Syed Arabi Idid agreed that it did appear as if Najib had gone back on his word but felt the Prime Minister did it out of concern for public safety.

"I don't think he was pushed by the right wing in his party," Syed Arabi said.

"He did not realise the consequences of abolishing the preventive laws earlier. He is doing this to correct something that was not right, so it should not be seen as breaking a promise.

"The prime minister has to be pragmatic. Between going back on his word and the security concerns of the public, he would of course choose the latter." – September 27, 2013.

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