

Fiasco Looms for Malaysia's Ruling Coalition

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One of Malaysia's most respected polling organizations is expected to release figures over the next few days showing that support for the ruling Barisan Nasional from all three of the country's major ethnic groups is dropping steeply, to the point where if an election were held today, the national coalition would be buried in a landslide.

The loss of support is not just from ethnic Indians, whose approval figures for the Barisan have dropped from 45 percent to 30 percent, or the ethnic Chinese, only 8 percent of whom support the coalition, but from ethnic Malays, the mainstay of the coalition. Support has dropped from 61 percent to 50 percent, according to sources who have seen the figures. In Penang, the poll reportedly shows that the Barisan wouldn't win a single one of the 40 state seats and 11 parliamentary ones.

That has led to deepening concern over the performance of Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, with growing calls for him to either step down in favor of another UMNO figure or to take dramatic steps to revitalize his leadership. Even the mainstream press, all of it owned by Malaysian political parties, is becoming increasingly emboldened to criticize his performance.

Reportedly, according to political sources in Kuala Lumpur, he is increasingly being ignored within his own coalition, most recently by Sarawak strongman Abdul Taib Mahmud, who is stepping down as chief minister. Taib named his former brother-in-law, Adenan Satim, as his own replacement despite a promise during a meeting in London that he would heed Najib's wishes in naming the new chief minister.

With both national and intraparty elections out of the way last year, Najib gambled that he could drastically cut subsidies for sugar, petrol and rice in a bid to put the country's fiscal condition back into shape, with the fiscal debt running close to the maximum permissible limit of 55 percent. But with the cost of living soaring upwards, he faces growing outrage. He has since been forced to back away from a sharp rise in highway tolls. And, while anecdotal evidence in the markets indicates that prices are climbing inexorably upwards, critics say the controlled press is continuing to report that there is no cost of living problem.

One of the issues that won't go away is a government decision to ban use of the word Allah to mean God in Malay-language Bibles, which has infuriated Christians and moderates, who point out that throughout the Arab world, Christians use the word as a proper noun. Najib has come under fire for making moderate statements when he is out of the country, but refusing to take a stand on the issue, or to rein in vocal Malay supremacy

organizations such as Perkasa, headed by Ibrahim Ali, whose intemperate racial statements have increasingly poisoned the political atmosphere.

Within UMNO, Najib's wife, Rosmah Mansor, has become a lightning rod for those who see her as flaunting excess wealth including designer handbags, watches and jewelry at a time when the country is facing cost of living problems. Many blame her for decisions that the prime minister is – or is not – making.

Najib is said to be shaking up his staff, replacing his long-time chief of staff with a younger, more dynamic individual. Reportedly he is also expected to call a party retreat to seek to convince party division chiefs and others within the United Malays National Organization that he has a plan to revitalize the political situation. Party leaders complain that 10 months after the narrow parliamentary victory – and popular vote loss – that left the Barisan in charge, Najib has still not called for a post-mortem of the way the race was run.

With US President Barack Obama scheduled to visit the country on a state visit in April, it is imperative to get moving, say political analysts in Kuala Lumpur. Behind Najib is the ever-present specter of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who has taken no public position against Najib but who clearly has unleashed bloggers who are hounding the prime minister on all sides. Sources within the Mahathir wing of UMNO told Asia Sentinel that Mahathir is after Najib's head.

It had been thought that, having emasculated Najib's economic plans after the election, the Mahathir wing would be content to leave the weakened prime minister in his place until the next election. The two most viable candidates to replace him would be Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who has reportedly said he is too old and tired for the job, and Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who is regarded even by many UMNO figures as too mercurial and polarizing for the job.

However, A. Kadir Jasin, former chief editor of the New Straits Times and a close confidant of the 88-year-old former premier, in his blog, "The Scribe," on Saturday suggested that Muhyiddin might not be so tired, or that a third candidate, Hishamuddin Hussein, Najib's cousin and the party's third-ranking vice-president, might be a possible alternative.

Thus, despite denials on all sides, the political picture is beginning to resemble that in 2008 and 2009, when growing forces coalesced to drive Najib's predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, from the premiership. The growing drip of blog comments is an indication that Najib must take action or face a serious revolt.

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