

## **Months after GE13, Najib needs to get into gear**

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**COMMENTARY BY THE MALAYSIAN INSIDER**

How did Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak survive the last 10 months in office? No seriously.

It has been one C after another C since he led Barisan Nasional (BN) to a less-than-convincing victory at the general election on May 5, 2013.

For the record, C stands for crisis or calamity, and both can be used interchangeably to describe Malaysia's dysfunctional political, religious, racial and economic situation post-13th general election (GE13).

Recent surveys show that more Malaysians are despairing over the rising cost of living and are convinced that national leaders are clueless about the economy and don't have a plan for the country.

Worse yet, when Najib has had to make a strong decision for the good of the majority, he has opted for the wrong option.

For example, the decision to "study" the Approved Permit scheme further was a political decision made at the last minute by a leader more concerned about the push back from 98 AP holders than ending a get-rich-quick scheme that has deprived the government of billions in revenue.

Instead of bringing some form of resolution to the "Allah" issue, the PM has abdicated his leadership role, preferring instead to allow non-governmental organisations and government agencies to inject strident and threatening tones into the debate.

The end result: Christians are unhappy. Muslims are unhappy. And the rest of the country is left wondering when did it become fashionable to rule by autopilot.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the critics are no longer just the chattering class or the BR1M class (those earning RM4,000 and below).

Even members of royalty, well-heeled businessmen and politicians are puzzled how it got so bad so fast for Najib.

They can't understand how someone, who has been groomed for the top job for more than 30 years, and surrounded by a battalion of advisers/consultants/special officers seems so indifferent about his problems.

So indifferent about Malaysia's drift towards mediocrity, intolerance, extremism and helplessness.

After all, he won the general election and became stronger, at least in theory, after the Umno elections. But strangely, paralysis afflicts Putrajaya.

Most critics are just content with venting their grievances with Najib over dinner or a teh tarik.

Others like Suara Guru Masyarakat Malaysia are going further. They are taking to the streets to protest against the controversial school-based assessment system.

The government said that it would review the scheme but the NGO countered that it wanted it abolished.

In facing down the government, SGMM is showcasing another trend: the willingness of individuals and groups to challenge a government perceived as weak, indecisive and sometimes just plain confused.

A third group of critics (and this includes veteran Umno politicians and former civil servants) have been making a beeline to see former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In addition to picking apart the decision by the Najib administration to cut subsidies for several items, some of the visitors have also briefed Mahathir on the political temperature on the ground, with some having evidence that BN would perform worse than it did in GE13.

They paint a dire picture for Dr Mahathir, as if they need to. The former prime minister has been a stinging critic of Najib for some time now, smacking him for everything from his reliance on BR1M to his preference for the status quo in the contest for Umno's vice-presidents.

The latter effectively snuffed out Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir's chances of becoming vice-president.

It remains unclear if Dr Mahathir intends to launch a campaign to push Najib out but those who have had discussions with him walk away with the unmistakable sense that he believes that Najib and the BN government have lost their way – badly.

And the chief gripe is that no one seems to be taking charge of making sensible decisions on the economy. Everything seems haphazard.

And even when a decision is made, it is not explained well or defended vigorously, leading to the inevitable flip-flops.

Some senior Umno ministers know that there is a malaise enveloping Putrajaya, a malaise that has meant that no meaningful post-mortem has been done on BN's performance in GE13 until today.

In private, they, too, concede that Najib must speak with more authority in public more often; and that the administration is having a tough time just holding its own in the perception battle.

Interestingly, many of them blame Najib's advisers and his wife for the loss of focus, sparing him and themselves condemnation for poor policy choices and even more bizarre personal choices.

They remain convinced that Najib is the best man to lead Malaysia but are unanimous in their conclusion: Najib has to shake things up drastically.

How? They don't seem to know. Perhaps a sign of times of the talent level in the cabinet.

For his part, Najib seems to be responding to growing despondency over his administration's performance with some small steps.

He is overhauling his staff at the Prime Minister's Office, even replacing a long-time chief of staff with a younger and more dynamic individual.

There is also a retreat in the works for Umno division chiefs and other power brokers in the party – a move aimed at convincing the Umno ground that Najib has a game plan and is a leader worth closing ranks behind.

But the drift in the country is such that Najib has to do more than employ a Band Aid strategy to regain the confidence of Malaysians that he is in charge. Much more.

There must be evidence and on a daily basis that life is getting better not worse for millions of Malaysians who are struggling to cope with the rising cost of living.

If not, the public will start its own countdown on Najib. – February 14, 2014.

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