

**Smaller Ge13 Win Keeping The PM Silent Amid Divisive Politics**  
**Malaysian Insider**  
**May 11, 2014**  
**By Sheridan Mahavera**

As part of The Malaysian Insider's continuing series on the anniversary of the most heated general election in recent memory, we examine the Prime Minister's first year in office. After winning his own electoral mandate, we look at how has Datuk Seri Najib Razak performed and is he on the right track to take Malaysia to become a developed nation?

A year ago, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak seemed to be everywhere.

He took the country by storm after 2009 to sell his transformation agenda, which included promises to turn Malaysia's economy around and to create a society that celebrated every Malaysian regardless of where their grandparents hailed from.

But after winning his own electoral mandate on May 5, 2014, Najib seems to have curiously and perplexingly retreated into a shell.

He has been silent especially on the rise of Malay and Muslim extremism and anxieties about the rise in living costs among the bottom 40% of the populace.

This is despite the fact that according to a March 2014 Merdeka Center poll, 52% of Malaysians were still satisfied with his performance.

This "elegant silence" from the experienced politician, who at one time said he was the country's helmsman, is worrying, said academics and analysts. It reflects a dangerous strategy of escalating the double game that was also used in his first term.

In other words, Najib pays lip service to Malaysians who want a more inclusive, accountable and open-minded Barisan Nasional (BN) and he

promotes Malaysia as an exemplary moderate Muslim democracy on the world stage.

But at the same time, the party he heads coddles the paranoid, narrow-minded Malay Muslim supremacists in Umno and its allied non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

### **Taking the easy way**

The first signs of this double game can be seen in the first few months after the May 5 polls when Najib worked hard to present his administration as being committed towards moderate Muslim values.

He had even received praise from British Prime Minister David Cameron in October last year for “uniting moderates in the fight against extremism”.

But then came his Umno general assembly speech two months later when Najib said the party would be the party of Muslims and Islam.

War was declared on homosexuals, Shia Muslims and anyone else deemed “deviants”. Umno, Najib said, would also defend the ban on the use of the term Allah by non-Muslims.

Several weeks later, Malay supremacist groups announced they would protest outside churches in Selangor that used the term Allah in their sermons.

Selangor Umno also launched roadshows throughout the state to support a state ban on non-Muslims using Allah. At some of these roadshows, effigies of Catholic priest Lawrence Andrew were burnt.

It was only when attacks began on churches in Penang did Najib speak up and urged the public to remain calm.

What is seldom heard now is the 1Malaysia credo of inclusivity and respect for all communities.

Pulai Umno division chief Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed believes that the rash of Malay supremacist chest-thumping, and now, the push for hudud in Kelantan, is part of the administration’s new strategy after the loss of support during the 13th general election.

"I think he may have been convinced that the Chinese will not vote for BN in the next round. So there is no other option to get the majority Malay vote (but to use) race and religious issues

"It doesn't mean that this strategy will get Umno 60% or more of the Malay vote throughout the country again but it may be enough to marginally win the Malay-majority seats and retain power.

"The sad part about it is I know he really believes in the 1Malaysia concept but he has decided... to be led by the popular culture in Umno than to lead it and change it for the better," said the Pulai MP.

### **Taking things personally**

One reason for his change of attitude could be due to how personally invested Najib was in his transformation programmes.

He launched the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), the Government Transformation Programme (GTP), the New Economic Model (NEM) and the 1Malaysia concept.

The NEM was arguably the most ambitious. Among others, it promised to scale down affirmative action for Malays in order to make them more competitive.

It also called for the redistribution of wealth and opportunities on the basis of need and merit instead of merely race.

So when the BN received fewer votes than expected in the general election and he failed to regain two-thirds majority in the Parliament, he took it as a personal rebuke.

"I think he really worked hard personally and delivered major reforms like abolishing the ISA (Internal Security Act) which he thought the people would be satisfied with," said Nur Jazlan.

"I think the GE 13 results shocked him as he thought he was giving people what they wanted.

"I think he forgot that the majority of voters are not matured democratically on policy issues and vote based on emotion," said Nur Jazlan, who is also the Public Accounts Committee chairman.

Political analyst Dr Wong Chin Huat, however, believes that Najib did not get enough support from voters as his programmes did not significantly solve the problems of Malaysian society in the first place.

"His first term was characterised by cosmetic policy reforms but without substantial political reforms.

"Without democratisation, it was inevitable that his so-called 'reforms' were objected by the old guards. Najib was only hoping that he could win enough votes to rejuvenate Umno's hegemony," said Wong, of the Penang Institute.

### **Taking Umno away from the racist brink**

A policy of nurturing a May 13 bogeyman will not work, said Nur Jazlan. Neither is it the right thing to do in a plural, multi-cultural society like Malaysia.

"Malays who live in cities have changed and are shaped by urban culture and are less intimidated by threats of (another) May 13.

"There is a large Malay urban middle class who know they have wealth, income and assets to lose in the event of another May 13, and would react negatively to Najib's silent endorsement of these extremists," he said.

Instead, there is a compelling argument for Najib to abandon the double game, take hold of Umno and lead it towards being more moderate, inclusive and more responsive to what voters want.

The Merdeka Center poll which showed that one out of every two Malaysians were still satisfied with Najib's leadership also showed that he was more popular than the government and BN.

The poll showed that 48% were unhappy with the government compared to 42% who were happy, while 52% said they were unhappy with the BN while 38% were happy.

Ibrahim Suffian of the Merdeka Center said people are usually more sympathetic towards leaders and more appreciative of their intentions.

A leader's individual popularity compared to his administration is a strong argument to chart that administration's direction.

That direction could include re-engaging with the public on the issues that matter to them and steering Umno back from its intolerant, xenophobic drift. According to the centre's survey, the most pressing issue that respondents think needs the government attention is fighting corruption – this includes wastage in spending.

In descending order, the next is fighting inflation, improving security and the police, fighting inflation, providing [affordable](#) housing, improving government efficiency and building more infrastructure in rural areas.

No one mentioned implementing hudud as a priority or going after Shia Muslims or worries about Christianisation, according to the respected pollster.

Since the polls show that Najib is consistently more popular than Umno, there is no reason why he should cave in to the interests of its extremist, lunatic fringe.

Instead, Najib should make them cave in while tackling the problems Malaysians really care about. But he has yet to do so. – May 11, 2014.

Hakcipta © 2013 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/smaller-ge13-win-keeping-the-pm-silent-amid-divisive-politics>