

## **Big anti-Najib protests fail to draw ethnic Malay crowd**

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**By BLOOMBERG**

Weekend rallies that saw tens of thousands of people in the Malaysian capital demand the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Razak failed to draw ethnic Malays, indicating a funding scandal hasn't spurred major dissent in the premier's grassroots base.

Singing and chanting crowds estimated by organizers at 300,000 and by authorities to have reached 50,000 packed central Kuala Lumpur for two days, wearing yellow t-shirts emblazoned with the Malaysian word for "clean". Organizers the coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, or Bersih, said about 30% of people were Malay, with the rally dominated by ethnic Chinese who have drifted from Najib's ruling coalition in recent years.

Malays account for as much as 60% of the country's 30 million people, though estimates vary, and are the cornerstone of Najib's United Malays National Organisation.

"Internationally for Najib he would pay attention because it shows sizable numbers of people wanting his resignation," said Ibrahim Suffian, an analyst at the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. "Domestically, nothing has changed. His detractors don't have the ammunition to say that Malays are deserting him and his party. The ground has not shifted significantly."

Southeast Asia's third-largest economy has faced two months of upheaval over claims Najib received billions of ringgit linked to a troubled state investment fund in his private accounts. Najib denied the allegations, fired several critics and pushed back against detractors. The furor has contributed to a decline in the ringgit, while foreign funds have dumped more than US\$3 billion of the nation's shares this year as the economy slows.

### **'Shallow mind'**

Speaking on Sunday in a televised speech on the eve of independence day, Najib called the rally "unwise" and said it "exhibits a shallow mind and a lack of national spirit." He also told reporters that while those who protested might be a "little disaffected," the "rest of the Malaysian population are with the government," the Today newspaper reported.

“Najib saying that he has the Malay support and implying that it’s the Chinese who are out on the streets, brings to mind his comments in the 2013 elections, when he implied the Chinese were to be blame for his coalition’s worst performance in memory,” said Terence Gomez, a professor at the University of Malaya. “Umno is trying to show they maintain the support of the Malays by focusing on this issue, to distract from the problems at hand.”

### **Rural voters**

Since his coalition won re-election in 2013 despite losing the popular vote for the first time, Najib has shored up his backing within the Malay community, bolstering handouts especially to poorer people. He retains the endorsement of Umno divisional chiefs.

A pro-Najib rally planned for October aims to bring out one million people, the Malay Mail Online reported, citing Jamal Yunos, an Umno division head in the opposition controlled state of Selangor.

Umno’s base is mostly ethnic Malay voters in rural areas where there is a heavy weighting of parliamentary seats. Roughly one in every 10 Malaysians are party members. Najib’s father, former premier Abdul Razak Hussein, crafted a system in the early 1970s to give preferential treatment to Malays and indigenous people, known collectively as Bumiputeras. That system endures today.

### **‘More symbolic’**

“The Bersih rally is more symbolic in nature,” said Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, coordinator of the Malaysia program at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. “It was important for the opposition to show strength.”

Organizers said it was the biggest of three rallies they’ve staged since Najib came to power in 2009. Protesters sang songs, waved flags and listened to speeches assailing Najib’s leadership. There were smaller rallies in other Malaysian cities.

One development at the rally was brief appearances on Saturday and Sunday by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who led Malaysia for 22 years until 2003 and is a member of Najib’s party.

“I would like the Umno members of parliament, the heads of division to remove him,” Mahathir told reporters and supporters before walking to join the protest. “You are selling your soul, your country, your race. This country will end up being one of those countries where there is no governance.”

### **Funding claims**

While Mahathir has been vocal in saying Najib should step down — he’s accused the premier of abusing his power and called for a no-confidence vote — his influence within Umno has diminished. His appearance could “indicate his willingness to work with the opposition to bring the Najib government down,” Mohd Nawab said.

The scandal started when the Wall Street Journal reported on July 3 that about US\$700 million may have moved through government agencies and companies linked to state investment company 1Malaysia Development Bhd, and ended up in accounts bearing Najib’s name before the 2013 election. The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission said the money was from donors in the Middle East, not 1MDB. The accounts have since been closed.

Najib has denied taking money for personal gain. The receipt of political funds was to meet the needs of the party and the community and wasn’t a new practice, Bernama reported Aug 9, citing Najib.

Najib’s been aided by an opposition in disarray. The alliance led by Anwar Ibrahim that had been eating into Umno’s support crumbled in June in the aftermath of Anwar’s imprisonment for sodomy, a charge he denies. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, or PAS, an opposition party that is predominantly Malay, showed lackluster support for the weekend rally, though it plans its own anti-Najib gathering in September.

“The Malay turnout was probably better than the government-linked press has suggested, but the demonstrations were clearly mostly urban and Chinese,” said Gregory Poling, a Southeast Asia specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “That shows that, with PAS sitting out, and perhaps also due to Anwar’s jailing, the opposition is far less pan-Malaysian than it was during the previous Bersih protests.”

— by **Chris Blake & Niluksi Koswanage**

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