

Hishammuddin No. 1 pick as future PM, survey shows
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As pressure mounts against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak to resign over the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, and opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim remains behind bars, a survey on the country's next generation of political leaders has found that most Malaysians want Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein to become the future prime minister.

The survey by independent pollster Merdeka Center found that 19.8% of the 1,008 respondents polled from January 21 to 30, preferred Hishammuddin as the future prime minister over his peers Khairy Jamaluddin (8.6%), Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (8.4%), Rafizi Ramli (3.9%), Mohamed Azmin Ali (3.7%) and Nurul Izzah Anwar (1.7%).

The survey, commissioned by The Malaysian Insider, also revealed that the majority of respondents (19.4%) wanted Hishammuddin to lead Barisan Nasional if or after Najib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin retire.

"Malaysians prefer Hishammuddin as he has the pedigree and the family name. He was in the limelight last year over the MH370 disappearance and was perceived to be handling it quite well. He became the face of Malaysia and got good ratings," Ibrahim Suffian, director of Merdeka Center, told The Malaysian Insider.

"He's not a controversial figure in the media, there have been no open discussions on his problems as minister, and people have all but forgotten the keris-waving incident of 10 years ago," he added, referring to Hishammuddin's infamous brandishing of the keris at Umno's 2005 annual general assembly.

Support for Hishammuddin as the future prime minister cut across race, gender and even the political divide, with the defence minister being the most popular candidate among Malays, Chinese, Indians, males, females, and Pakatan Rakyat and Barisan Nasional supporters alike.

Among Pakatan Rakyat supporters, 12% preferred Hishammuddin as prime minister, followed by PKR secretary-general Rafizi (11.1%), PKR deputy president Azmin (9.8%), Umno Youth chief Khairy (6.4%), PKR vice-president Nurul Izzah (4.7%) and Umno vice-president Zahid (2.6%).

However, Ibrahim said that this did not necessarily mean that opposition supporters preferred BN to lead the country over PR.

"Malaysians, including PR supporters, just can't imagine PR winning the next general election. They are more used to the idea of BN leaders ruling the country. So even PR are imagining Hishammuddin as their future PM because they don't see BN losing," he said.

"Perhaps three years down the line, when we are closer to the next general election, that will change."

The survey also revealed that Zahid had lost out to Khairy because of the home minister's unpopularity among the non-Malays and Pakatan Rakyat supporters.

While Zahid was the second most favoured choice for prime minister among Malays, with 13.6% naming him as their preferred candidate, he was the least popular choice among the Indians and the Chinese, with only 0.7% and 1% respectively stating they wanted him as the future prime minister.

"Supporters of Pakatan Rakyat are mainly Chinese, and they have a negative view of Zahid," said Ibrahim.

Zahid, who is seen as one of the more right-wing Umno leaders, has often courted controversy for making disparaging remarks against the Chinese.

Meanwhile, more Malaysians wanted Rafizi as prime minister rather than Azmin because the former was featured more prominently in the media, while Nurul Izzah lost support because of her gender, said Ibrahim.

But when respondents were asked who they believed was most suitable to lead Pakatan Rakyat after Anwar, most (13.9%) chose Azmin, followed by Rafizi at 7.1%, PAS's Datuk Husam Musa (6.7%), Nurul Izzah (6.5%), and PAS's Mohamad Sabu (1.8%).

Ibrahim added that some respondents opted to name other candidates as their preferred choice for prime minister besides the six listed, with 3.3% preferring Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir, followed by DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng (1.3%), Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin (1.0%), and Anwar (0.7%).

"But the focus of our survey was to look at the next generation of leaders, which is why we omitted Muhyiddin, Anwar and Lim."

Najib's position as prime minister has been on shaky ground since he led Barisan Nasional to its worst electoral showing in 2013.

Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has openly withdrawn his support for Najib and criticised the embattled Najib's policies, including the 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M) cash vouchers and the repeal of the Internal Security Act.

More recently, reports of 1MDB's financial mismanagement and growing debt have further tainted Najib's reputation, as he chairs the firm's advisory board.

The attacks against Najib prompted 160 Umno division chiefs to hold a meeting in solidarity with Najib on Sunday.

In Pakatan Rakyat, Anwar's five-year prison sentence for committing sodomy had effectively ended his political career, paving the way for the opposition pact's second tier of leaders to step forward. – March 11, 2015.

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