

Change in leadership unlikely, says report blaming lack of 'obvious substitutes'

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Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is likely to remain in charge despite growing calls for his resignation over the 1Malaysia Development Board (1MDB) financial scandal, largely due to the lack of "obvious substitutes", The Economist has said.

Pointing to the "outwardly support" that Najib appears to be getting from Umno, the publication says the party's weaknesses – being quarrelsome and complacent – would prevent any new leader from being effective.

Specifically naming Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein as candidates qualified to take over from Najib, The Economist says that like the prime minister, neither party veteran has the vitality needed to rejuvenate the ruling party.

The ability of the opposition to put up an alternative to Barisan Nasional was also questioned, with the magazine saying Pakatan Rakyat is in disarray, especially following the conviction of former opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in February this year.

In addition, The Economist says action by Putrajaya in clamping down on free speech, including monitoring allegations on social media and blocking access to whistleblower website Sarawak Report, is strengthening Najib's hold on the government.

Earlier this month, The Wall Street Journal reported that it had seen documents indicating that US\$700 million (RM2.67 billion) from companies linked to the state-linked investment fund had been paid into what they believed to be Najib's personal bank accounts.

The prime minister is the chairman of the 1MDB advisory board and also the finance minister.

Najib has been blaming the allegations of wrongdoing against him as part of a "political sabotage" campaign led by former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

For months, Dr Mahathir has been calling for Najib's resignation, warning that under him, the coalition party which has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957, will lose the next general election, due to be held by 2018.

Pressure on the prime minister also comes from the opposition, which has demanded that Najib step down until a special task force, now investigating the allegations, completes its task.

According to The Economist, even if Najib is cleared of any wrongdoing, the 1MDB

scandal has tainted his leadership and his sliding popularity will see him lose support from Umno before the next general election.

However, holding all the cards in his hands, Najib is rumoured to be mulling a Cabinet reshuffle.

This would presumably silence his critics from inside Umno and possibly remove his opponents, thus making it even more difficult to bring him down. – July 25, 2015.

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