

**Can Najib's Cabinet reshuffle save him, ask analysts**  
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**By Sheridan Mahavera**

Although Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has purged his Cabinet of dissidents, such as Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, it is still unclear whether he would be able to silence other critics in Umno and regain flagging public support.

On one hand, a Cabinet that is solidly behind him will give the prime minister room to address concerns about the economy – the number one concern of most voters according to surveys – in the hopes of regaining public support.

On the other, the circumstances and timing of the reshuffle have cast doubt on the integrity of the government's probe into scandal-ridden state investor 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB), which is Najib's brainchild.

Muhyiddin's removal after his criticism of Putrajaya's handling of 1MDB comes at the height of a probe into allegations that funds from 1MDB-linked entities were funnelled into the prime minister's personal bank accounts.

But among the majority of Malaysians, according to survey results, the 1MDB issue is not the prime concern even as the country's integrity is at stake, and so, too, the image of the prime minister.

**Bread-and-butter issues over politics**

Merdeka Center polls have consistently shown that Malaysians are more concerned about cost of living issues, jobs and housing than politics.

In a January 2015 survey, 62% of respondents cited these as issues they were most worried about, whereas only 3% said they were concerned over political issues.

The same survey showed that Najib's approval rating had dipped to 44%, his lowest since taking office in 2009.

This dip in support, coinciding with economic concerns, may have put the financial complexities of the 1MDB scandal low on the radar of most Malaysians and afforded Najib room to proceed with a controversial Cabinet reshuffle.

By getting rid of dissent within the Cabinet and forging a team which would solidly back him, Najib could start tackling the economic issues that concern most Malaysians, Merdeka Center's Ibrahim Suffian said.

"In the long term, if he can reduce the infighting, he can start bringing up his approval numbers by focusing on the economy," he said.

"Not to make small these issues, but the larger public is more concerned with the

economy than with 1MDB.”

Najib’s plans, however, can still hit a roadblock if Muhyiddin decides to rally disenchanted voices within Umno to censure the prime minister through a vote of no-confidence, said Wan Saiful Wan Jan of the Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS).

Given Muhyiddin’s seniority in Umno, the ousted former deputy prime minister could start a real war within the party if he decided to do so, he added.

“He also has the option of waiting for the next parliamentary sitting and initiating a vote of no-confidence against the prime minister in Parliament,” said Wan Saiful, who is IDEAS chief executive.

But he admits that these options appeared unlikely given the hold that Najib, who is the party president, had over Umno’s influential division heads.

At a party meeting in March, more than 160 out of 199 division chiefs pledged their support for Najib, even as 1MDB was being investigated.

These division chiefs, many of whom are Umno ministers and elected representatives, are critical in ensuring whether a vote of no-confidence would actually succeed.

A report by The Malaysian Insider on May 10 also showed that ordinary members who had brought motions of no-confidence against Najib at the division level did not get enough support to see them through.

“The tide against Najib has increased within Umno, but the reality is that if he wants to stay, there is nothing preventing him from doing so,” Wan Saiful said.

### **Integrity of 1MDB probe**

The most damning effect of the Cabinet reshuffle, held on the same day as the replacement of the Attorney-General (A-G), will be on investigations into 1MDB. Any trust in the probe to get to the root of the scandal would be severely impaired.

“People will be very suspicious at why all these changes are happening when the probe itself is gathering force,” said anti-graft campaigner Datuk Akhbar Satar, president of Transparency International Malaysia (TI-M).

Tan Sri Abdul Gani Patail, replaced as A-G, was a member of a high-level task force probing into 1MDB which had made five arrests in the last week.

Gani has had wide experience handling corruption cases and replacing him mid-stream would affect the probe, Akhbar said.

“The new attorney-general will have to prove that he can investigate without fear or favour. There are also questions as to whether he has the specialisation necessary for

this," said Akhbar, referring to Federal Court judge Tan Sri Mohamed Apandi Ali, who is now the A-G.

Adding to the cloud of suspicion is the fact that Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which was carrying out its own probe into 1MDB, has to halt its inquiry following the promotion of four of its members to the Cabinet.

This includes its vocal chairman, Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed. The appointments come as the PAC was scheduled to grill 1MDB's top executives early next month.

"The timing and the way this reshuffle was done seem to imply that the prime minister wants only to silence his critics and to stop any possible criminal prosecution," said Wan Saiful.

"It is a bad move for the country and raises questions about the integrity of the government." – July 29, 2015.

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