

Big anti-Najib protests fail to draw large Malay crowd

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Weekend rallies that saw tens of thousands of people in the Malaysian capital demand the resignation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak failed to draw a large number of ethnic Malays, a sign that a funding scandal is yet to spur major dissent within the premier's grassroots power base.

Singing and chanting crowds estimated by organisers at 300,000 and by authorities to have reached 50,000 packed central Kuala Lumpur for two days, wearing yellow t-shirts emblazoned with Bersih, the Malay word for "clean".

Despite having called the gathering illegal, heavily-armed police opted to let the protest run its course.

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 furore has contributed to a decline in the ringgit, while foreign funds have dumped more than US\$3 billion (RM12.5 billion) of the nation's shares this year as the economy slows.

The two-day rally by the coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, or Bersih, did not involve a large number of Malays who form the core membership of Najib's ruling Umno.

Protest organisers said about 30% of those at the rally were Malay, with the crowd dominated by ethnic Chinese who have drifted away from Najib's coalition in recent years. Malays account for about 60% of the country's 30 million people.

To blame

"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 election, when he implied the Chinese were to be blame for his coalition's worst performance in memory," said Terence Gomez, a professor at the Universiti 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."

Since his coalition won election in 2013 despite losing the popular vote for the first time, Najib has moved to shore up support within the Malay community, bolstering handouts especially to poorer people in rural areas. He also retains strong backing among the Umno divisional chiefs.

More symbolic

"The Bersih rally is more symbolic in nature," said Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, coordinator of the Malaysia programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

"It was important for the opposition to show strength and their ability to bring to the streets large numbers of Malaysians sends a clear signal to National Front leaders to rethink their support of Najib," he said of Barisan Nasional, the coalition that has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957.

Organisers said it was the biggest of three rallies they have 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 and in countries including Australia.

"The Bersih rally over the past two days was unwise, exhibits a shallow mind and a lack of national spirit," Najib said Sunday night in a televised speech ahead of the country's independence day.

"We reject street protests that disrupt public order as it is not the proper channel to voice opinions in a democracy."

Dr Mahathir appearances

Perhaps the most significant development at the rally was brief appearances on Saturday and Sunday by former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who led Malaysia for 22 years until 2003 and is a member of Najib's party.

While Dr Mahathir has been vocal in saying Najib should step down – he has accused the premier of abusing his power and called for no-confidence vote – his influence within Umno has diminished in recent years.

"I would like the Umno members of Parliament, the heads of division to remove him," Dr 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 report

The scandal started when The Wall Street Journal reported on July 3 that about US\$700 million (RM2.6 billion) may have moved through government agencies and companies linked to state investment company 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), 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 was not a new practice, Bernama reported August 9, citing Najib.

Najib has been aided by an opposition in disarray. The alliance led by Datuk Seri 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.

PAS, an opposition party that is predominantly Malay, showed lacklustre support for the weekend rally, though it plans its own anti-Najib gathering in September.

Not resolved

Dr Mahathir's appearance at the rally could "indicate his willingness to work with the opposition to bring the Najib government down," Nawab said.

By not halting the rally, the government has probably seen off an immediate threat if it had escalated, said Clive Kessler, an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales.

"I still can't say the same about Najib," he said. "His issues are still not resolved." – Bloomberg, August 31, 2015.

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