

Najib reasserts command with National Day celebrations

The Malaysian Insider

August 31, 2015

Malaysia's government reclaimed the streets of the capital Monday after massive weekend protests demanding the premier's ouster, staging its own show of force with colourful National Day celebrations attended by thousands.

With Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak presiding, the government held a parade attended by large crowds of flag-waving spectators in scenes broadcast live, symbolising what reform advocates and analysts admit will be an uphill task affecting change in the government.

Organisers of the weekend demonstrations said more than 200,000 people attended the rallies staged to demand Najib's removal over a financial scandal.

"Well, we've gave it our best shot, and now it's their turn again," said Simon Tam, a lawyer who attended the demonstrations on both days.

"Getting Najib to step down is not easy, and maybe there is not much hope at all. But how can we stand by and say nothing?"

Najib has been under pressure since The Wall Street Journal last month published Malaysian documents showing nearly US\$700 million (RM2.6 billion) had been deposited into his personal bank accounts beginning in 2013.

His Cabinet ministers have since admitted the transfers, calling them "political donations" from unidentified Middle Eastern sources, but refusing to explain further.

Influential ex-leader Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has pressed for Najib's ouster for more than a year, calling him corrupt and a poor leader, caused a stir by attending the rally Sunday and urging a sustained effort to topple Najib.

Dr Mahathir, who squelched civil disobedience during his 1981-2003 command of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, surprised many by evoking the Philippine "people power" revolt of 1986.

"If the government ignores the law, we have to demonstrate. If you look at (former Philippine president Ferdinand) Marcos, when he was ruling the Philippines they had to overthrow him through demonstrations."

But the weekend rallies and Dr Mahathir's support are not seen as causing serious unease for Najib, who retains firm control of his powerful ruling party.

His government in turn enjoys continued solid support among the country's majority ethnic Malay population.

"The rallies showed (civil society and the opposition) can turn out the numbers, but

whether actions like this can really make a difference is unclear," said Ibrahim Suffian, head of leading Malaysian polling firm Merdeka Center.

"Najib can rest easy because the only way anyone could remove him is through Parliament or the ruling party."

In a speech Sunday night, Najib defiantly refused to step down and called the protesters "shallow-minded".

Najib recently purged critics in his cabinet and appears to have stalled investigations into the funding affair through personnel moves.

Rally participants in Kuala Lumpur seemed drawn mostly from the country's ethnic Chinese minority, which makes up about a quarter of the population, suggesting the demonstrations had limited national support.

Government minister Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan alluded to this in deriding the demonstrations.

"When will these people realise that the real battle is at (the) grassroots, which is (the) ruling coalition's forte?" he said in a tweet Sunday. – AFP, August 31, 2015.

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