

Najib tightens grip, draws Umno, PAS closer after assembly
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Having silenced his critics at the Umno general assembly, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is moving to cement his hold on power by further wooing the Malays.

After five months of political turmoil sparked by a multimillion-dollar funding scandal, Najib has seen off potential threats to his leadership, securing the backing of the powerful division chiefs in Umno.

His message of unity and his calls for loyalty went largely unchallenged at a five-day annual Umno assembly last week attended by detractors including former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

As an additional buffer, he is bringing Umno closer to the main opposition Islamic party. That could help rally the Malay vote ahead of an election due by 2018.

Umno, in power since independence in 1957, won the 2013 ballot with its slimmest result yet as Chinese and Indian electors deserted Najib's coalition, and since then he had embraced policies that play to his support base of Malay voters.

A closer working relationship with PAS could have dual outcomes: Further help Najib fend off the funding scandal and lead to more hardline policies. PAS, as the opposition party is known, has advocated shariah law – which allows for stoning or amputation for certain crimes -- in Kelantan which it governs, while Najib has already made greater use of the country's Sedition Act with the detention of media executives and political opponents.

Fear-mongering

"Communal politics is on the rise in Umno and they know they cannot depend on the Indian and Chinese votes anymore," said Wan Saiful Wan Jan (pic), head of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs.

"Najib is leading a political party that wants to move to the right. People are reacting to fear-mongering and fearful of the implications if they change their attitudes."

Najib has reached out to PAS and proposed the parties work to promote Islam's doctrines.

Beware the possibility of the country being governed by a party that is not Islamic, he told about 2,700 party elites at the Umno assembly.

As he instructs grassroots leaders to start preparing for the next election, Najib faces a population frustrated with rising costs and stagnant wages.

Business and consumer sentiment have weakened and the economy is slowing.

Investor confidence may return if Najib can show he is stronger and able to lead his coalition to a more decisive victory, Wan Saiful said.

Political stability

"When it comes to the business community, the thing they are looking at the most is political stability," he said.

"Ironically if they are looking for certainty, then they wouldn't care really how Najib and Umno would remain in power."

Najib has denied any wrongdoing over revelations that RM2.6 billion appeared in his private accounts before the 2013 election. He said the money was political donations from the Middle East, not public funds.

Malays account for as much as 60% of the country's 31 million people, though estimates vary.

PAS has had a tenuous relationship with Umno since the 1970s when it was temporarily in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

PAS leader Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang said Friday the party was open to talks with anyone who could advance the principles of Islam.

Hadi also urged Umno to "repent" and said it was a good time for the party to return to an Islamic way of life.

Dancing parties

"Umno and PAS have always been playing a sort of a dance," said James Chin, director of the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania.

"The point of common interest is that they are both afraid that the non-Malays will take over."

The opposition coalition which includes PAS splintered in June, in part over PAS's move to approve the use of the Islamic penal code in the state of Kelantan which it controls.

Shariah law allows for the punishment of adulterers with death and thieves with amputation.

That sat uneasily with its coalition partners, which included the ethnic Chinese-dominated DAP and urban-focused PKR.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who led the opposition alliance, is in jail for sodomy, a charge he denies.

Two choices

Najib is seeking to profit from the opposition disarray. Malaysians must choose between an alliance led by Umno or DAP, he said on Thursday, warning a government run by the DAP would be disastrous.

"Do we want the future of our children and grandchildren and the Islamic religion to be left to other than the existing Malay and Islamic leadership?" Najib said.

The prime minister was a teenager when riots erupted between Muslim Malays and ethnic Chinese in Kuala Lumpur in 1969.

His father Tun Abdul Razak Hussein became prime minister the following year and responded with a programme to reduce Chinese dominance in business by giving preferential treatment to Bumiputeras, which refers to the Malay and indigenous people. Those programmes still exist today.

"His statement comes as no surprise because every time Umno faces a crisis, it will use fear tactics to scare Malaysians with racial issues," leaders of Pakatan Harapan, a new opposition coalition that does not include PAS, said in a statement.

"Pakatan Harapan calls on the people, especially Malays, not to be trapped in these racial games."

Najib may struggle not to play the race card before the election, said Samsul Adabi Mamat, a political science lecturer at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

"While there are pressures for him to move to the right, Najib is actually still pushing for the concept of 'wasatiyyah' or moderation in Islam," Samsul said.

"He is trying to find the middle ground where the form of Islam proposed by Umno is one that can be accepted by all races. If he were to use PAS's form of Islam, the Chinese will reject it." – Bloomberg, December 14, 2015.

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