

From greatest hope to scandal-ridden, a look at Najib's 40 years in active politics

Malaysian Insider

Feb 21, 2016

By Sheridan Mahavera

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak commemorates 40 years in politics today but the milestone comes at the toughest period in a career, which has seen him go from being the hope of Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN) to one now besieged with allegations of financial scandals.

Besides a growing rebellion among ordinary Umno members demanding he resign, the party's sixth president is running a country where in the last general election, 52% of voters rejected the coalition he leads.

Najib's own ambitions of being a reformer or "transformer" is in tatters after becoming embroiled in two financial scandals – 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and the US\$681 million (RM2.6 billion) "political donation" that flowed into his personal accounts.

He has also been forced to face an almost decade-old controversy when a recent Al-Jazeera investigative documentary on the murder of Mongolian woman Altantuya Shaariibuu exhumed alleged connections between the victim, the man who was convicted of the crime, and Najib himself.

The Malaysian Insider looks back at some milestones in Najib's political career, beginning with the great expectations placed on him, his promising start as prime minister and his current quagmire.

The great Umno hope

It seems that having great expectations and hopes pinned on his shoulders is a common theme of Najib's career going by his personal biography in NajibRazak.com and Wikipedia.

The economics graduate was thrust into politics at the age of 22 and became the country's youngest Member of Parliament.

When his father, second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, passed away on January 14, 1976, the party banked on Najib to take up his father's parliamentary seat of Pekan.

Najib won uncontested in a by-election that was held five weeks after Razak's death. In his first year as an MP, he was made a full Cabinet member in charge of telecommunications, energy and postal services.

Then after the 1982 general election, at the age of 29, Najib was made Pahang menteri besar, again one of the youngest Malaysians to occupy such a post.

Twenty-seven years later, Umno would call on Najib to revive flagging public support after his predecessor and former party president Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi resigned following disastrous losses in the watershed 2008 general election where the ruling BN, long entrenched in power since Independence, was denied its two-third majority.

In between, Najib rose up the ranks as Umno Youth chief, Supreme Council member, vice-president and deputy president.

According to a party insider, Umno lore dictates that a leader must serve in three Cabinet portfolios – education, defence or home and finance – before he can be considered as a prospective party president and prime minister.

Najib has served in all three, with finance being his shortest stint starting in September 2008 under Abdullah.

He took over the reins from Abdullah in April 2009.

Enthusiastic start

After Najib took over from Abdullah, he pledged deeper and more ambitious reforms to the country's laws and economy in order to turn Malaysia into a "high income nation" and "the best democracy in the world".

To achieve the first aim, he came out with the New Economic Model (NEM), of which some of the main aims were to reduce income inequality, boost productivity and wean the economy from oil and gas products.

The NEM was also supposed to make the private sector, instead of the government, the main driver of the economy.

Since it was going to replace the New Economic Policy (NEP), the NEM also wanted to reform the latter's Bumiputera affirmative action initiatives.

Najib also carried some degree of political reform such as repealing the Internal Security Act and making it easier to hold political assemblies and rallies.

He also created a Cabinet portfolio on integrity in order to create better governance and fight corruption.

"The NEM was warmly welcomed by progressive Malaysians but was resisted by narrow and conservative political forces," said economist Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam (pic).

Analyst Wan Saiful Wan Jan said initially, despite the huge criticism he faced, Najib succeeded in getting through painful but necessary economic reforms.

These included abolishing blanket fuel subsidies, introducing a consumption tax (the goods and services tax) and reducing the role of government in the market through government-linked companies (GLCs), said Wan Saiful, who heads the Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas).

Some of those moves have put Malaysia in a better economic position than it was when Najib took over in 2009, said Navaratnam of the Centre for Public Policies Studies (CPPS).

"But the reforms have stalled. We have succumbed to the parochial short sighted forces of protectionism and race and religious politics... We could have done better if we had adopted more of the NEM model," said Navaratnam.

A cloud over his record

The halt in reforms coincided with Najib's failure to do better than his former boss Abdullah in the general election.

Despite the huge hopes pinned on him, Najib lost seven more parliamentary seats than Abdullah while BN's popular vote dropped from 51% in 2008, to 47% in 2013.

But perhaps more critically, said Wan Saiful (pic), Najib succumbed to the temptations of the flawed system that he inherited instead of rising above to change the system itself.

Instead of sticking to his plan of getting the government out business and instituting better corporate governance, Najib allowed the creation of 1MDB which then went on to spawn its own scandals.

Instead of committing to more democratisation, Najib put in place new laws such as the National Security Council Act or amended old ones – the Sedition and Multimedia Acts – to clamp down on public criticism.

The Anti-Corruption Agency was reformed under Najib's watch in 2009 into the more independent Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

But when it investigated how funds flowed into Najib's accounts last year, its officers were hauled up by the police or transferred.

"Good governance is going down and our institutions are under greater strain," said Navaratnam, adding that there was growing risk of "state capture" where powerful individuals use corruption to change a country's laws for their own interests.

The end result is that now, when people think of Najib, they no longer think of the NEM or the many policy initiatives he introduced in his more than 20 years overseeing the country's education and defence.

Instead, there is only 1MDB and the RM2.6 billion political donation.

"It has created a cloud over all the good intentions and initiatives that he had made," said Wan Saiful. – February 21, 2016.

Copyright © 2015 Edge Insider Sdn Bhd

Source:

<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/from-greatest-hope-to-scandal-ridden-a-look-at-najibs-40-years-in-active-po>