

Weak institutions, Umno patronage protecting Najib from latest WSJ expose, say analysts

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By Jennifer Gomez

The latest allegation by The Wall Street Journal that more than US\$1 billion was deposited into Datuk Seri Najib Razak's his accounts, hundreds of millions more than previously identified, will not make any difference now as the prime minister has weathered similar allegations not too long ago, analysts say.

They also think that public sentiment over the money can be considered "done and dealt with", in the sense that an extra few hundred million will have little impact as the institutions which could have provided checks on his power have been weakened.

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng said those tasked with looking after checks and balances in the country have been replaced by those who do not find the prime minister guilty of anything.

"The amount in the first allegation was already big enough but it did not impact him, so another US\$400 million does not make any difference here," Khoo said referring to the RM2.6 billion or US\$681 million that was reported by WSJ in July last year.

"There is no mechanism, the people who are supposed to be looking after checks and balances are all replaced by people who don't find him guilty.

"So it's pretty much a done deal, it will not impact him," Khoo said.

Political analyst Oh Ei Sun from Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University agreed, saying that the latest expose would not make any difference to Najib's determination to remain in power, given that he had weathered similar allegations before and was not charged.

"The attorney-general said he is not pursuing charges, that already settled it.

"There is no need for him to clear his name, the important thing for him is to stay in power," Oh said.

The latest expose will also have little effect on Umno itself as party members and leaders who mattered were just as concerned about ensuring that patronage continued and about staying in power.

In that respect, Oh said Umno would continue to back Najib, who is also Umno president, as long as the "political largesse keeps flowing".

Political scientist Dr James Chin of Tasmania University in Australia said Najib did not need to explain to Malaysians about the additional money in his accounts as the general public have already formed a perception about the earlier political donation.

The latest expose would not impact the prime minister locally, he added, although the same could not be said for his international reputation.

A bigger impact on Najib's future was the ringgit, and the prime minister could face political uncertainty if the currency depreciated further.

"This is because Umno is the machine that dishes out contracts, so as long as businesses make money from these contracts, the prime minister will enjoy support.

"But if the value of the ringgit goes down, businesses will not be able to survive as everything the country produces is heavily reliant on imports."

Chin said he believed Umno's warlords would continue to support Najib as long as the ringgit remained stable and contracts were profitable.

"There is a big gap between ordinary members and Umno leaders. The leaders are the warlords who will support Najib as long as there are profitable contracts.

"Ordinary members may be angry but they don't decide the leadership," he added.

Head of think-tank Centre for Policy Initiatives Lim Teck Ghee said things would change once foreign investigators completed their probes into scandals implicating Najib's brainchild, 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

"At some point, especially with the foreign investigators coming up with their reports, silence will no longer be an option.

"Truth-seekers may not have long to wait for what has happened in the two cases of 1MDB and the political donation," Lim said.

In addition to highlighting the larger sum of money that allegedly went to Najib's accounts, WSJ's latest report also said most of the funds were from 1MDB.

It cited "global investigators" and said their findings contradicted the Malaysian attorney-general who said the donation came from the Saudi royal family.

Investigations into matters related to 1MDB have been launched in the United States, Switzerland, Hong Kong and Singapore. – March 2, 2016.

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