

Report: Najib benefits from focus on shariah law

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With the opposition divided over the controversial bill to amend Act 355, Barisan Nasional will remain in power, says Singapore daily.

PETALING JAYA: Efforts to strengthen shariah law in the country may be key to maintaining Barisan Nasional's (BN) hold on power, according to a report in The Straits Times.

Highlighting the recent controversy over proposed amendments to the Syariah Court (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355), the report said differing stands within the opposition pact had led to the "lack of a credible front to stand against BN".

It noted that within Pakatan Harapan, while DAP was firmly against the amendments, former PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim, whom DAP backs as the next prime minister, appeared to support the shariah law amendment bill.

The report cited a statement from Anwar on April 8 in which he had said "the strengthening of the shariah courts should be agreed in principle by all".

Within PKR itself, however, opinions clash over the bill, with party leaders in Sabah and Sarawak saying that any amendment to strengthen Act 355 goes against the Federal Constitution.

In a joint statement on April 21, Sabah PKR chairperson Christina Liew and Sarawak PKR chairman Baru Bian said PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang had the right to table the bill. However, they added, that was the extent of their agreement on the matter.

"We are opposed to the bill in its current form as it is clearly a means to pave the way for hudud law to be imposed, which would in effect be introducing a dual criminal justice system," they said.

"Any attempt to introduce hudud or shariah law in Malaysia will be viewed by Sabah and Sarawak as a breach of the Malaysia Agreement, and we would consider such a breach to be actionable in a court of law," they had said.

Analysts told the Singapore daily that such divisions within the opposition were enough to allow Prime Minister Najib Razak to maintain his edge.

"He didn't need to do much. He's just poked and the opposition has imploded," socio-political analyst Eddin Khoo was quoted as saying.

This is despite Najib's recent struggles with approval ratings, which the report noted had fallen to record lows amid spiralling economic conditions, increase in the cost of living and allegations of graft involving 1MDB.

"BN components can tell their constituents they triumphed," S Rajaratnam School of International Studies senior fellow Oh Ei Sun told ST.

The report said opposition parties were struggling to toe the line between appeasing their non-Muslim supporters and fending off accusations of being anti-Islam.

Meanwhile, it added, many Malay-Muslim voters were in favour of closer political ties between PAS and Umno.

According to ST, even if PAS saw losses in its traditional strongholds due to opposition from non-Muslims, it is Umno who will gain from such an outcome, and this would help keep BN in power.

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