

In 'political death zone', Aussie PM faces season of protest
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CANBERRA (Aug 15, 2011): Embattled Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard (pix) begins a make or break parliamentary season this week, trying to finally deliver her key carbon and mining tax policies against a barrage of opposition from voters, business and opposition parties.

Gillard and her minority Labor government remain stuck in a "political death zone" according to the latest opinion poll on Monday and would be swept from office if elections were held.

Despite months of campaigning, Gillard has failed to lift support for her government and its key policies, which face unpredictable parliamentary votes between now and November.

"It really is the business end of the match for Gillard now," said political analyst John Uhr from the Australian National University, adding that she needs to secure her centrepiece reforms in the coming parliamentary session.

Coinciding with the start of the spring parliamentary sittings on Tuesday, an anti-government rally will be held on the lawns of parliament house to oppose plans to price carbon.

At the same time, 11 separate truck convoys set off this week for Canberra to demand fresh elections, arguing the minority Labor government has been hijacked by Green and independent MPs who guarantee it power.

Organisers of the convoy protest by truck drivers, cattlemen and shopkeepers say it is opposed to bad government and minority interests.

"We are anti a system that allows unrepresentative minorities to dominate decision making," organiser Mick Pattel said on Monday.

"We want a clear direction for Australia and we believe that an election is necessary to achieve it," said Pattel, president of the National Road Freighters Association.

The truck convoys could act as a lightning rod for growing discontent among Australians who believe they are not benefiting from the country's resources-led economic boom.

If such public protests gain momentum they could eventually undermine Gillard's leadership, if her party begins to feel she is leading it to electoral defeat at polls due 2013.

Gillard determined

Despite the building protests and business against new taxes due to global economic jitters, Gillard is determined to push ahead with a series of controversial bills.

The main laws will be plans for a carbon tax from July 2012, ahead of an emissions trading scheme from mid 2015, as well as a 30% profits-based tax on iron ore and coal mines.

The government will also introduce tough anti-smoking laws, which force tobacco companies to sell cigarettes in plain packages. The laws have angered global tobacco giants, who have

threatened international legal action.

"In this parliamentary session we've got some big legislation to deliver," Gillard told her ministry on Monday.

Adding to Gillard's problems are a new bout of global economic uncertainty and concerns about global growth, which could end the government's hopes of returning its budget to surplus by fiscal year 2012-13, ahead of 2013 elections.

"We've already seen a softening of the commitment to a surplus before the next election," Uhr said, adding economic uncertainty will make it hard for the government to spend on social issues, like health and education, to claw back voters.

However, Gillard will be buoyed by the new numbers in the upper house Senate, where the Greens will hold the key votes needed for the government to pass its laws, ending the need for negotiations with the Greens and two independents.

That means Gillard should be able to pass her centrepiece policies mostly intact, enabling her to then to try and move the political debate onto more fertile ground for Labor in 2012, a year out for the next election.

A new Nielsen poll in Fairfax newspapers on Monday showed Opposition leader Tony Abbott's party would wipe out Gillard's Labor if an election were held soon. The opposition had 58% support to 42% for Labor on a two-party basis. – Reuters

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