

## How Malaysia's Leader Is Damaging His Reformist Reputation

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By Robert Horn

*Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has styled himself a reformer, but his government's prosecution of protesters shows he still has a long way to go.*

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak appears determined to give himself a political black eye. On June 13, government prosecutors will haul into court 10 leaders of Bersih, a coalition of civil society groups campaigning to clean up the country's corrupt elections commission. The government is demanding damages for destruction to public property during a clash between Bersih demonstrators and police in Kuala Lumpur on April 28. At least 100,000 people marched for clean elections in the Malaysian capital that day, while tens of thousands more joined protests in 11 other cities across the country and 80 cities around the world. Whether or not the government wins compensation in court, however, no amount of money will undo the damage it is inflicting upon its own reputation by pursuing the case.

The April 28 demonstrations were a stunning show of discontent in a country where protests are rarely tolerated. In half a century, Malaysia has advanced from a poor British colony with a plantation economy to an ambitious, middle-income nation with science parks, cybercities and skyscrapers. But in a trade-off typical of Asia, the Barisan National coalition, which has ruled the country since independence in 1957, curtails civil liberties and keeps a tight rein on political opposition in exchange for delivering prosperity. That governing model, however, contains the seeds of its own decay. Malaysia's successful development "translates into a better-educated electorate who have more sophisticated demands and expectations," political scientist Prof. Farish Noor tells TIME.

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In recent years, the government has found it increasingly difficult to meet those expectations. According to World Bank data on the Gini coefficient, a measure of wealth inequality, the gap between rich and poor in Malaysia is larger than it is in neighboring Thailand, where inequality has been a factor driving civil unrest and political violence in recent years. Since the beginning of the global economic crisis in late 2008, Noor says there is also a "growing anxiety" among the middle classes in Malaysia "who feel their jobs and economic opportunities are threatened."

Keenly aware of the escalating problems, Najib has tried to present himself as a reformer. The steps he has taken so far, however, haven't done much to improve BN's image as increasingly corrupt, ill-equipped to deal with global economic complexities and out of touch with the aspirations of significant segments of the population. In 2008, BN was shocked when opposition parties captured five of the country's 13 states in national elections—the worst showing in the coalition's history. If voters are more dissatisfied now, they are also more frustrated: few can see how real change can be achieved as long as the BN controls access to the media and elections continue to be riddled with irregularities. Najib's attempts at reform “ring hollow when the electoral system remains flawed,” Datuk Ambiga Sreenivasan, Bersih chairperson one of the defendants in the case brought by the government, tells TIME. “The stark reality is that genuine reform will not benefit those in power.”

**(PHOTOS:** Living in Malaysia's Melting Pot)

Najib has received credit for repealing the draconian Internal Security Act that was used to suppress dissent. But he then turned around and decided to prosecute Bersih leaders over the violence on April 28. Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch contends that video evidence shows security forces were actually responsible for the clashes. The forces initially allowed demonstrators into Merdeka (Independence) Square, which the government had previously declared off limits, and then began attacking the demonstrators with tear gas and batons for breaching the area. “If the prime minister was a true reformer, he would have condemned this violence and called for an independent inquiry by the Human Rights Commission,” Sreenivasan says.

The irony is that Sreenivasan believes Najib truly wants to be a reformer, but is constrained by the realities of his governing coalition—he relies heavily on the support of politicians who control rural provinces in a semi-feudal style. To appease rural voters, Najib and his coalition have showered them with populist policies, such as a new minimum wage that will raise incomes for an estimated 3.2 million people and a 13% pay rise for civil servants. By contrast, they have ignored Bersih's eight demands for freer and fairer elections, such as cleaning the voter rolls of fake names.

Enacting electoral reforms would benefit the government. The coalition would probably still prevail at the ballot box because of its populism and emerge with a stronger mandate because it obtained its victory fair and square. Instead, the rulers are opting to suppress Bersih. That will only serve to stoke a political pressure cooker, deepen divisions and undercut the legitimacy of the government. “This is nothing less than a battle for the political soul of Malaysia,” Robertson says. No matter the outcome of the court case, it's a battle that is far from over.

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