

Najib's fear campaign



The Malaysian Prime Minister's ruthless tactics to hold onto power at all costs demonstrate that he is the one who is most afraid while his people are willing to fight on, Bridget Welsh writes.

This week Najib Tun Razak is beating the Malay chauvinist drum at his party's annual general assembly (AGM). Meetings of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) have regularly followed this mode, but the use of racism and paranoia have taken on greater intensity in the face of its leader's eroding political legitimacy.

For the past two years, Malaysia's Prime Minister has been beleaguered by the [1MDB scandal](#) that has involved not only nearly \$700 million going into Najib's personal account but also raised issues of criminal money laundering, embezzlement and economic mismanagement involving over \$3.5 billion. The case is being investigated and prosecuted in over six jurisdictions, most notably by

the [US Department of Justice](#). The scandal featured centre stage in last month's Bersih 5 rally in which thousands went to the streets to protest corruption, economic mismanagement and systematic inequalities in the electoral process.

Despite public discontent, Najib has adeptly used a variety of tactics to stay in power, which is crucial if he is to avoid international prosecution. The most obvious of these involves a crackdown on political opponents. Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was [jailed](#) in 2015. Since then more than 10 opposition politicians have faced a variety of charges from sedition to challenges to 'parliamentary democracy'. Last month whistleblower and parliamentarian, Rafizi Ramli, was [convicted](#) of violating the Official Secrets Act for releasing evidence associated with 1MDB. This week's UMNO meeting has called for continued no-holds barred attacks on the opposition.

The crackdown on dissent has also targeted civil society. On the eve of the 19 November Bersih 5 rally, its chairperson, Maria Chin Abdullah, was [arrested](#) under the *Security Offences (Special Measures) Act*. She was held in solitary confinement, using a provision in the law that was designed for terrorism and national security. This follows a litany of attacks on other activists, cartoonists and artists, as well as ordinary citizens for 'insulting' posts on Facebook and WhatsApp. In 2015 there were 91 cases for 'sedition' alone. Human Rights Watch has detailed these in an October 2016 [report](#).

The media has also been in the firing line. In 2015 the harassment of publishers led to the [closure](#) of *The Malaysian Insider*. Last month the online portal *Malaysiakini* was [raided](#), and its editor [Steven Gan was charged](#) for simply publishing a video. This comes on the back of the *Communication and Multimedia Act* being tightened in March. 'Protection' from insults has extended beyond Najib to those seen to be protecting him. The aim is to silence criticism of Malaysia's most unpopular prime minister.

To complement these attacks, Najib's government has deepened its use of racial chauvinism. From the 2013 elections onwards, it has depicted opposition to it as 'Chinese' and reinforced the view that Najib's UMNO party, is the only viable protector of the Malays. This politicised framing lacks any grounding in reality as over 40 per cent of Malays voted for the opposition in 2013 and the most recent Bersih rally showcased the breadth of multi-ethnic opposition to Najib, especially among young Malays. Nevertheless, Najib's strategy has increased ethnic tensions along political lines. His ratcheted war-like rhetoric at the UMNO meeting points to a willingness to tear the society apart for his own political survival.

Scare tactics have extended to thuggery, most evident in the crass use of violence and intimidation by the [UMNO-linked 'red shirts'](#). Some of these political vigilantes – many of them allegedly paid to participate in hooliganism – [have also been arrested](#) but have clearly received favourable treatment. Despite official denials, the widespread perception is that thuggery is being promoted by the government.

Najib's machinations also involve political manoeuvring. He has forged an alliance with conservative Islamist zealots. His government has allowed Wahhabi [Islam](#) to extend its extremist and intolerant tentacles through the unchecked and increasingly locally- and internationally-funded religious bureaucracy, [with particular support from Najib's close ally and 1MDB partner Saudi Arabia](#). Lacking moral authority of his own, Najib has chosen to ally himself with the discredited Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), led by Hadi Awang and his designer suit-wearing appointees. Perceptions of corruption and discriminatory land grabbing from indigenous people have [corroded PAS's public support](#), as Hadi has introduced a bill that hypocritically [strengthens the punishment of ordinary Muslims](#) for immoral activity. This bill, known as RUU 355, will open up opportunities for abuse by authorities in a government where the rule of law is not fairly practised and fuel ethnic tensions. It is no coincidence that bill was reactivated after the Bersih 5 rally.

Most of Najib's politicking has focused on maintaining the support of his own party. He has repeatedly paid off UMNO leaders for their 'loyalty' through patronage while also purging UMNO of its leading critics. Former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad [resigned from the party](#) earlier this year due to his opposition to Najib, while the party [voted to expel](#) former deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin, another prominent critic of the Prime Minister. Najib appointed the grassroots party-stalwart Ahmad Zahid Hamidi as his deputy, aiming in the short-term to deflect party challenges. He is seen to be holding off on the appointment of his favoured cousin, Hishammudin Hussein. But even within UMNO dissatisfaction remains high due to the realisation that Najib is an electoral liability and UMNO could lose. This is despite the attacks, divisions and lack of clear alternative leadership from the opposition. The public shows of loyalty through dictator-like salutes of the leader at the UMNO AGM hide real unease among members and growing discontent between UMNO elites and the grassroots.

It is therefore little wonder that Najib has increasingly relied on the levers of power to stay in office. His government has broadened gerrymandering and malapportionment in the 2015-2016 electoral [redelineation](#) exercise, conducting it without transparency and repeatedly dismissing the record number of challenges. He has also increased populist measures to buy support among Malaysia's poorest citizens, a pattern that was replicated in the May 2016 Sarawak state elections. These measures have been introduced despite serious strain on operating budgets for government departments and widespread cuts to education and public services.

To compensate for the lack of funds and rising debt, Najib has turned to his new geostrategic ally - China - for money. Not only did China [bail out Najib over 1MDB](#), but he also returned from a visit to Beijing at the beginning of last month bearing some [\\$34 billion worth](#) of deals, funds perceived to help greasing the patronage wheels ahead of the next elections to be scheduled before the end of 2018.

China has a vested interest in keeping a weak, dependent, autocratic leader in power. Little attention is being paid to the potential loss of Malaysian territory to the Chinese, to the unfavourable terms of these arrangements and their limited positive impact on Malaysia's

economy. Guarding against the possibility of electoral defeat, Najib has also established the new [National Security Council](#), which came into effect in August and allows the prime minister to dictatorially declare 'security areas' through a body made up of his own appointees. At the same time, Najib has created a new special defence force and increased his personal protection.

While the Prime Minister has tried to use fear against his people, the person who has been the most afraid is Najib himself. This week's UMNO meeting reflects rising paranoia. So far he has managed to hold on to power, but not without incurring serious costs. Growing authoritarianism, widening political polarisation, deepening ethnic tensions and discredited immoral leadership have damaged Malaysia's social and political fabric. Najib's mismanagement is also evident in the economy's contraction and the depreciating currency. That thousands braved threats of arrest and thuggery to attend the Bersih 5 rally shows that many Malaysians are willing to fight on and will not be cowed. The test ahead will be the point when Najib's fear campaign backfires more widely, and more Malaysians realize that the only thing they have to fear is Najib himself.

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