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No. 122/2012 dated 10 July 2012

The 1Malaysia Project: Uniting and Dividing at the Same Time

By Farish A Noor

Synopsis

In the lead-up to the 13th General Elections in Malaysia, which remains divided along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines. Prime Minister Najib Razak has been promoting the idea of '1Malaysia' as an inclusive nationalist project that brings together the disparate communities of the country. But his efforts to unite Malaysians have been dampened by resistance both from within and without the fold of his Barisan Nasional coalition.

Commentary

Prime Minister Najib Razak is currently both the president of the UMNO party and the head of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition in Malaysia. After taking over from former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in the wake of the 2008 elections – which witnessed one of the worst ever performances of the ruling BN coalition – he came under considerable pressure to demonstrate that he can both lead his party and the coalition and bring about radical economic-institutional transformation during his tenure.

Thus far Prime Minister Najib has presented himself as a transformer who has embarked on a series of wide-ranging reforms in the country: The Economic Transformation Plan (ETP) has been introduced to wean the public away from government assistance; several areas of the economy have been opened up for foreign capital investment. The Internal Security Act has been replaced by new legislation that is more focused on genuine security threats to the country, and even a Peaceful Assembly Act has been passed through Parliament to regulate popular demonstrations.

Despite these measures however, the ruling coalition faces a number of daunting obstacles: While Prime Minister Najib's personal approval ratings have soared, the same cannot be said for the rest of his party and the coalition he leads. Surveys done in Malaysia have noted that the BN's component parties – notably the MCA and Gerakan, which have been seen as the 'Malaysian Chinese' component parties of the BN, have not recovered their support from their respective constituencies. Nor has the MIC regained the support of Malaysian Indians.

A top-down means of nation building

The '1Malaysia' idea that was propounded by PM Najib has been an attempt by the BN government to recover some of the support it has lost since the March 2008 elections. It has been broadly spelled out as an inclusive

ideology of 'soft nationalism' that seeks to re-state the ties of commonality and mutual citizenship enjoyed by Malaysians regardless of race or religion. In this respect '1Malaysia' is reminiscent of the 'Islam Hadari' (Civilisational Islam) project that was promoted by former PM Badawi.

Though the idea of '1Malaysia' has been widely publicised through the state media apparatus and has received some support from the private sector (with '1Malaysia' slogans and banners appearing on products, posters, advertisements, at bus stops and taxi stands, etc.) it is not certain whether the idea has truly gained a hold on the complex Malaysian electorate.

One reason for this may be that like Badawi's Islam Hadari, '1Malaysia' is seen as part of the state's official discourse, and as such is seen as an establishment rather than an organic discourse, that emanates from the top. And if the state requires the support of the public sector to propagate this idea, then it also has to deal with the massive 1.4-million public service personnel who have, of late, shown signs of discontent with some of the painful, though necessary institutional re-structuring measures the establishment has undertaken. Initiatives such as the 1Malaysia public shops for the poor in the urban areas have taken some of the sting out of the current economic crisis that afflicts ordinary Malaysians, but may not have assuaged wider anxieties about the future of jobs and pensions in the country.

Divisive voices within

Another factor that may have dampened the public's response to the 1Malaysia idea is the continued vocal and visible presence of right-wing nationalist groupings that continue to harp on Malay ethno-religious dominance in the country, and have been vocal in their criticism of PM Najib's inclusive policies. As noted earlier, there is now a discrepancy between the popular perception of Prime Minister Najib – which has improved in recent times – and the wider perception of the state of politics in the country. There are still many sectarian and exclusive groupings – ranging from Chinese educationists, Indian-Hindu rights activists and Malay ethno-nationalists – who represent strong centrifugal forces that run counter to the inclusive appeal of '1Malaysia'.

Prime Minister Najib is therefore facing enormous challenges to keep the country he leads together, and to seek a middle ground where those who wish to build an inclusive, plural Malaysia can unite. As a transformer his biggest challenge is the institutional inertia he has to overcome, from vested interests in the public sector as well as his own political party and coalition. Yet as the anti-reform forces in the country continue to criticise him for his transformation efforts, it is the opposition that benefits more, for it lends the impression that PM Najib is not able to hold his fort together.

Should these circumstances continue unchanged in the lead-up to the next election, PM Najib's transformation agenda may well be derailed by the pressure coming from anti-reform groupings in the country. Such a scenario has happened before, with PM Badawi's Islam Hadari project that never got off the ground. In such a situation however, the biggest loser will be UMNO and the BN themselves, who cannot afford to lose support at the coming General Election; they will have to secure at least a marginal increase in seats gained at both the Federal and State level. Ironically, while some of PM Najib's transformation plans have won him the support of the international business community, he has yet to gain the support of the Malaysian public whom he is trying to unite under the banner of '1Malaysia'.

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