

Why Najib is the most interesting politician on Instagram

Shafizan Mohamed | Published: 12 Nov 2018, 12:15 pm | Modified: 12 Nov 2018, 12:15 pm



LETTER | Hate him or love him, Najib Abdul Razak is the most interesting Malaysian politician to follow on Instagram. With over half a million followers, he may not be the most popular, (that title goes to Dr Mahathir Mahomad who currently has over three million) but he is amongst the most active and most personal.

It is in his sharing of the personal that makes Najib's Instagram appealing. He invites people to look at the different and many sides of Najib, the sides of him that are no longer covered in the news.

Sharing of the personal among Malaysian politicians is now becoming more common especially among the younger ones. Syed Saddique, Nurul Izzah, Hannah Yeoh and Khairy Jamaluddin are among those who are very popular and have been inviting their followers into their everyday lives.

Who can forget that photo of Syed Saddique in that bathtub full of ice?

But there is just something more to Najib's Instagram that makes it intriguing when compared to the Instagram accounts of his much younger and more popular contemporaries.

Maybe this is because Najib is a very significant yet troubled figure in Malaysian politics. It would not be too much to even say that at the moment he is Malaysian politics. Not a day goes by that Najib is not mentioned in the news.

Public persona

Every issue that affects the country goes back to him. His supporters long for him while his detractors pick on him, but it seems that everyone calls on him. And Najib answers on social media, in the news, everywhere.

For a figure facing the possibility of spending many years in detention, Najib does not appear fallen. On Instagram, at least. He is persevering, sharing not just photos or snapshots but also strategic narratives that are both personal and political.

These narratives, told over 700 Instagram posts since 2013, invite his followers as well as anyone on the Internet into the life of Najib Razak. A life that is free of 1MDB, Jho Low and SPRM. A life that is almost free of Rosmah Mansor. Going through his posts throughout the years, one can see the changes in his life. His early posts were mostly work-related.

Najib was then the prime minister. His daily life was full of political engagements. Instagram was initially just an album capturing his public persona. This gradually changed. By 2018, Najib appeared to be more personable and sharing more private photos. Could he have known that life was about to change for him? That he would need to shift his attention to things other than politics? Maybe.

Even as the 14th general election was approaching in May 2018, Najib was sharing more personal compared to strictly political photos. There were more photos of food, family and Kiky. Najib had welcomed 2018 with a photo of Kiky. For those who do not know, Kiky is Najib's beloved cat. Kiky is a common feature on Najib's Instagram. In fact, there are more photos of Kiky than there are of Rosmah.

There were many posts specifically dedicated to Kiky where Najib will detail out about Kiky's antics. There were no dedicated posts for Rosmah. She can only be found at the background in several unrelated posts. Kiky used to have her own Instagram account but it has been removed.

Not sure if Kiky had been trolled and threatened on her account like her owner because not all who follow Najib on Instagram supports him; many are there just to troll him.

There are countless hateful comments in each and single one of Najib's Instagram post, even the ones of Kiky. But that did not deter him. He continued to stay active on Instagram.



It didn't take long for Najib to be back on Instagram after his party's historic loss on May 9. By May 13, he shared a 'Mother's day' dedication to his mother and all the mothers in Malaysia. Najib was not defeated. He was still an elected politician and a reputable figure. Not having to run a country probably gave Najib more time to spend with his family and his constituency. His current posts are mostly of those who still see him as relevant. They are Kiky, his mother and the people in Pekan who voted for him.

But it could be that Najib's perseverance is paying off. His more current postings appear to receive less negative comments. People are now commenting about his posts rather than everything else that is wrong about him. There are even more comments motivating Najib and supporting him, many even claiming to miss him.

Could Najib be changing the public's opinion through his personalisation of politics? It is not impossible. The personalisation of politics and the mediatisation of politicians' image have never

been more effective. All over the world, politicians are flocking the social media to build a connection with the public based on the sharing of their personal and private lifestyles.

Even so-called dictators are exploiting this populist form of political communication. On Instagram, you can find Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, taking a selfie with schoolchildren and Chechnyan President Ramzan Kadyrov visiting the dentist. Posts of politicians and their pets are even more popular. Barack Obama posted about his dog, Bo; Justin Trudeau shared a photo of a tender moment he had with his dog Kenzie and Emmanuelle Macron's dog Nemo is quite the celebrity of his own.

So, Najib may well be on the right track when it comes to exploiting the uses of Instagram.

After all, online platforms such as Instagram are personal and individual in nature. They rely on performative imageries. While it's hard to attract people with formal and straightforward political statements, it is easier to lure people to click on that photo of a cute and cuddly Kiky. Instagram may not offer the avenue for sharing strong political ideologies but it is made for sharing lifestyle images that are attractive, convincing and equally powerful in shaping public opinion.

So while the world looks on Najib and ponders his fate, wondering if the billion-dollar whale will surface; just go to Instagram and you will find that Najib Razak (and Kiky) is doing just fine.

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