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It's anyone's guess when Dr M will call for election

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AS early as a week and a half ago, after the weekly Cabinet meeting, a Minister from Sabah began quietly cancelling all his appointments for October and November.

He then spoke to his secretary about preparing flyers and posters and the next day, he flew back to his constituency and was not seen in Kuala Lumpur again until the next Cabinet meeting last Wednesday.

Apparently, Cabinet members had been told that the general election might - and that's still a mighty "might" at this point - take place in November.

It was not any sort of formal directive or announcement, but more in the nature of notice to prepare for the possibility of November polls. But it set the adrenalin flowing.

By last Monday, the news had circulated sufficiently for the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Composite Index to leap a breathtaking 27 points. For some, it was the quasi-official announcement they had been seeking following months of guesswork.

But the Prime Minister returned from his latest overseas trip as non-committal as ever, telling reporters waiting for him at the airport in an almost nonchalant manner: "I don't know whether I will hold an election or not. I have not made up (my mind)."

In fact, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has kept everyone, from Opposition figures to his own Cabinet Ministers, guessing time and again about the polls date.

(See accompanying story.)

"Everybody was looking for hints from him when he was overseas ... reporters and, even privately, people tried to ask. But nobody could pin him down to it," says Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar who had travelled with the Prime Minister to New York.

An editor who covered the Prime Minister in New York was hopeful for some polls hints. But, all he could get out of the Prime Minister was a cryptic "any time is a good time".

What's evident so far is that the latest round of speculation seems more a result of key Barisan Nasional figures coming to the conclusion that November is a suitable month rather than from any sort of clear-cut signal from the Prime Minister.

The chief reasons they offer for the November date: Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's High Court trial should be over by then; the arsenic issue has been satisfactorily resolved; the economy is on the road to recovery, and BN parties have been working hard on the ground and are ready for action.

BN leaders may not be aware of this, but the Opposition parties are of the view that November is just as fine a month for them.

Their reasons are almost diametrically, and ironically, opposite to that of the BN: feelings will run high again - and to their advantage - over the court decision which they have long predicted; their supporters do not accept the medical results of the arsenic case; the economy has not recovered sufficiently; the Opposition parties have been campaigning hard and were ready months ago.

There are always two sides to a coin, as they say.

At the same time, there are also politicians - from both sides of the political divide - who prefer polls later rather than now.

"Let the Opposition continue to trip over themselves," says Lembah

Pantai MP Datuk Shahrizat Jalil.

Others prefer a stronger growth figure to campaign on and a longer and more impressive bull run than what's evident now.

"Something in the region of 900 to 1,000 points ... that would really bring on an election mood," says an MCA figure.

On the other hand, DAP politician Ronnie Liu says that if polls are held next year, the more than one million or so new voters will be eligible to vote and Opposition parties are confident of getting those votes.

But all these pros and cons of early or late election are very much conjecture, assumption and speculation. As seasoned politicians will tell you, things can change dramatically once election is called and campaigning begins in earnest.

But it has not deterred politicians from making the most specific of predictions.

"Nov 14 ... that's when election will be held," a national MCA figure says confidently.

The thinking among a number of MCA politicians is that the PM is likely to announce the dissolution of Parliament between Oct 24 (BN's 25th anniversary celebrations) and Oct 28 (a day before the Budget is scheduled to be tabled in Parliament).

The BN anniversary bash will be a big morale-boosting event for the ruling coalition and an excellent starting point for campaigning.

"We intend to fill Bukit Jalil ... a show of force you know, that we mean business. And we'll be picking up steam from there," says an aide to a Minister.

But any announcement to be made, they say, is likely to be before the Budget because few, including Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, expect Parliament to disband midway through the Budget session.

"There is nothing in the Constitution to prevent this, just that it has not happened before," he says.

The 1990 general election came within an inch of such a scenario. Notice had been issued for Parliament to convene for the Budget session but polls were called before Parliament could sit.

"Say what you like, but the Budget is a trump card that every incumbent would want to use," says think-tank head Razak Baginda.

But DAP's Lim insists it also means a waste of expenditure and time (the Budget would have to be retabled after the polls) and, besides, the Budget is not the BN's sole means of announcing goodies for the electorate.

Opposition figures also claim the BN is trying to avoid the fiery debate that is expected during the long Budget session during which Opposition MPs intend to poke holes in the medical findings of the Anwar-and-arsenic issue.

BN MPs declare they are also itching to demolish the arsenic issue for what they think it is - a concocted political lie.

Assuming the November theory holds, the argument goes that Parliament will be dissolved in the third week of October, the Election Commission will issue a writ of election for nomination to take place by early November and polling by mid-November.

School premises, November advocates point out, will be available between Nov 6 and Nov 21.

The long, year-end school holidays, they add, begin on Oct 20 but the premises (venues for polling) will only be fully available between Nov 6 and 21. (PMR examination is on from Nov 1 to Nov 5 and SPM/STPM examinations from Nov 22 till Dec 12).

Most politicians, especially the incumbents, aren't taking any chances, hence the accelerated pace of preparation.

"People in high office have decided not to go anywhere in November, even

in late October," says Razak.

Ministers have to get permission from the Cabinet to go abroad whereas leave for Deputy Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries have been frozen.

Some think that the fact that the Prime Minister returned from abroad a day earlier than expected also means something.

MCA people say their president gave the word for "full mobilisation in the party" at the last presidential meeting and party figures are rushing to conduct final election workshops.

"We are in the final lap, I think," says Kota Setar MP Datuk Chor Chee Heung.

Maps are already up on the fifth floor of the MCA headquarters which has been converted into an operations centre.

"The date is not important. The thing is to be ready," says Bandar Tun Razak MP Datuk Tan Chai Ho.

Most Umno operations centres are ready and caterers are already making enquiries to supply meals and snacks for election workers who man such centres all over the country.

In Kelantan, some Umno people who plan to campaign for Jeli MP Datuk Mustapa Mohamed have even booked the TNB chalets in Jeli so that they will have a place to stay if elections are called.

And yesterday afternoon, MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu briefed a huge contingent of division heads at the party's headquarters. Party officials say the briefing was also to activate the party election machinery.

"As of now, all indications point to November, but everything still goes back to PM," says an Umno politician.

And that may explain why Pas vice-president Mustafa Ali seems leery about making any more predictions; Mustafa had been adamant that the election would take place in September.

"I'm not going to guess any more. Dr Mahathir is very evasive. Sometimes he says it's a good time, then in New York, he says to wait till Anwar's case is over," says Mustafa.

The Opposition camp also has its own trump card.

Parti Keadilan Nasional is planning to put up Anwar as a candidate and Anwar's lawyers are said to be looking at the legal side of this.

The BN side reckons that how Dr Mahathir decides will depend to a large extent on the reports by those attending the supreme council meeting yesterday morning.

Supreme council members were assigned to oversee the election machinery of five Umno divisions each. All the election dry runs were completed recently and the feedback will give the party president a better overview of the ground situation.

Meanwhile, it's still pretty much a case of trying to second-guess the Prime Minister.

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