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Polls (News Focus)
GENERAL ELECTION ANYTIME NOW?

By: Zulkefli Salleh

KUALA LUMPUR, May 16 (Bernama) -- With just about a year left of the current mandate of Parliament, the oft-asked question is when will general election be held.

Will it be held this year or next year? It is generally expected before April 2000, the last polls having taken place in April 1995.

On the ground, flags bearing the symbols of political parties, have sprung up everywhere. The flags are mostly of opposition parties which apparently do not want to be caught off guard should a snap election is called for.

The holding of political ceramahs too have intensified, leading to bold predictions that polls will be held anytime now.

These people feel that the next one or two months is the best time for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to dissolve parliament, paving the way for fresh polls.

The reasons advanced by them are:

+ The opposition DAP is in disarray following an internal crisis widely attributed to dissatisfaction with the leadership of party secretary-general Lim Kit Siang. A group of former party stalwarts including former Bukit Bintang MP have set up the Malaysia Democratic Party (MDP);

+ Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan), led by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail, apparently is not organised yet and the party's struggles are unclear. It also has to look for suitable candidates to contest in a contest where the choice of candidates has an important bearing on the outcome.

+ The country's economy is showing improvements with a one per cent growth predicted for this year.

+ Anwar, who launched the "reformasi" movement after being expelled from Umno in September last year, is serving a six-year jail term after being convicted on four charges of abusing his power.

+ Umno is in a stable condition because there are no party elections this year. The elections scheduled for June this year have been postponed to December next year.

As for those who think election will only be called for next year, they feel Dr Mahathir will not want the country's economic recovery process to be sidetracked by a general election.

Untoward incidents cannot be ruled out during an election and this will affect the economic recovery.

Also, it is better for the government to seek a new mandate from the people next year after the one year economic growth is known for certain in the first quarter of next year.

"The government's main agenda now is to restore the country's economy," says Prof Datuk Mahadzir Khir of Universiti Malaya's History Department.

He does not expect election to be called for this year because the present government can still function as an effective administration, especially in tackling economic problems.

Measures drawn up by the National Economic Action Council (NEAC) like selective capital controls are showing results and the stock market is giving positive signals.

Mahadzir says opposition parties have capitalised on the reaction by some people to the Anwar Ibrahim issue, to run down on the government.

"So Umno as the backbone of BN must take into account several factors to maintain the BN's two-thirds majority. Umno must first ensure it's united," he says.

Mahadzir feels the current BN government should be given the opportunity to table next year's budget in Parliament to continue with the economic recovery efforts. Traditionally, the budget is tabled in October.

The professor thinks the opposition will prefer the election to be held this year so that it can use the economic slowdown issue to highlight certain aspects of the administration that are said to be failures.

"But they don't let the people know about the external factors that cause the country's economic problems," he adds.

The member of parliament for Parit Buntar, Abdul Rahman Sulaiman, is also of the opinion that election will not take place this year as the government wants to concentrate on economic recovery.

"The actual economic growth for this year will be known early next year. The people will be in a better situation at that time to assess and make their choice," he says.

Abdul Rahman also rules out the possibility of Kedalian having an impact on the pattern of voting in the coming election, saying the new party's platform is still unclear.

He is confident that misconceptions among the people about the Anwar issue can be overcome by Umno.

Opposition parties recently reached agreement on the formation of an opposition coalition to at least deny the BN a two-thirds majority and if possible bring down the ruling coalition.

However, Ghazali Mydin, political science lecturer in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, does not rule out the possibility of an early election.

He says economic indicators like the stock market are positive and this may encourage the government to hold an election.

"If it goes on delaying, we don't know what will happen after September," he says.

Based on past experience, the extent to which the election will affect the country's economy will depend on the level of confidence among investors and businessmen.

"In the 1995 election, there were no negative effects on the economy as businessmen and investors were then confident," he says.

Malaysian Malay Chamber of Commerce vice-president (DPMM) Syed Amin Al Jafri is of the opinion that holding the election now will not affect the economic recovery.

As the polls get closer, certain groups will continue to take the opportunity to influence the people by harping on certain issues, he says.

"Everybody loves a winner. I'm confident the BN will win the election and the voices that have been criticising the government will be forced to agree," he says.

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