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Election (News Analysis)

1999: A YEAR OF ELECTIONS FOR MALAYSIA

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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 12 (Bernama) - Although the party elections of Umno originally slated for June has been postponed, the political scenario of the country for 1999 is still an interesting if not challenging one.

Most political observers in the land believe that those incumbents and potential candidates in Umno will use the time to prepare and draw up strategies for the party elections.

The postponement of the party polls was decided by the Umno Supreme Council at its meeting last Friday and the new date could be any time before December 2000 or 18 months from that original June date.

Aside from the busy time that Umno leaders would have, the year will also see several other political "events" that have a direct impact on the political and economic future of the people.

Among them are the Sabah state election, the MCA party election and the general election.

The Sabah state polls must be held by March at the latest, the MCA will have its elections in July and the general election is expected between August and November, a few months earlier than the full five-year term from the last election in April 1995.

According to observers, the tussle for posts in Umno will start early and be hectic because of several important vacancies, including the post of Deputy President that became empty with the expulsion of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the post and party last September, soon after he was sacked as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister.

Last Friday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad picked Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the Deputy Prime Minister.

But Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, has left it to the party to decide on the new Deputy President of the party which traditionally comes with the post of Deputy Prime Minister of the country.

In this scenario, so the political watchers say, the battle for the deputy president post of Umno will be as close as the 1981 clash between former Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and former Education Minister Datuk Musa Hitam.

That chair, which was won by Musa, fell vacant when the incumbent, Dr Mahathir, won without contest the president post of the party vacated by his predecessor, the late Tun Hussein Onn.

To these analysts, there is no indication that there won't be a tussle for the Number Two post or that it would be left to Abdullah, although he is said to be a potential successor to Dr Mahathir.

What is certain, according to these analysts, is that whoever wins this time need not wait for too long to fill the president's chair and then the prime minister's post.

"This is because during the height of the (political) upheaval following the sacking of Anwar, Dr Mahathir himself indicated that he had intended to step down but had to postpone it because of the economic recession facing the country," said a former MP from Perak who is now a corporate player.

Among the contenders for the deputy president post bandied about are Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah whose names were often mentioned when Dr Mahathir was casting around for a Deputy Prime Minister a few weeks ago.

Given his latest position, Abdullah will probably not confine himself to defending his vice president's post which he re-captured in 1996 after losing it in the previous elections.

This will pave the way for other potential leaders to bid for the vice president posts or to challenge the other two incumbents, that is, Najib and former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd Taib if they were to defend themselves.

Among the leaders said to have received the encouragement of their supporters to make a bid in that direction are Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman and Second Finance Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamad.

Some other analysts are inclined to see the forthcoming Umno election as a process where those in the Supreme Council who were linked to Anwar or the reformation movement initiated by him after his ouster, are weeded out.

Whatever the outcome, the general perception is that the results will decide the future of Umno in particular, and the country in general, because of its chain reactions to the hierarchy of leaders of the party and the government.

The Sabah election, on the other hand, is important because it is seen as a litmus test on the real strength of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition not only in the state, but also, in the penisular.

In fact, some political observers believe that a result not in favour of the BN in Sabah, would have a negative implication on the performance of the ruling coalition in the coming general election in the penisular and Sarawak.

Many are predicting that the Sabah state assembly will be dissolved after the Chinese New Year next month. The last state election was held on Feb. 18 and 19, 1994.

What is interesting about the Sabah polls is the aggressive campaign mounted by the opposition to dislodge the state BN that is led by Umno. The strongest challenge against the BN come from two sides -- the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) under the leadership of Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan and the Parti Barisan Rakyat Bersatu Sabah (Bersekutu) under Datuk Harris Salleh.

The MCA election in July is also another important political episode because it is the next biggest component party of the BN after Umno.

A MCA leader who is no longer active in politics though he had once held the post of deputy minister, says that although the contest would not be as hot as Umno's, a tussle cannot be avoided because rumours have it that Deputy President Datuk Lim Ah Lek wants to call it a day.

He said the leader most safe in his seat is party president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik because no leader strong enough to displace him, has emerged on the MCA stage.

The possibility of a general election in August or November is, of course, the highlight of all the political events this year.

The term of the present government will end in April next year but holding the election earlier is the norm in Malaysia.

All things -- political and economic -- considered, most observers agree with the possibility of the general election this year, based on the busy preparations made by the political parties, especially the BN.

Although there are signs of the economy turning around, the issue of Anwar's ouster will definitely be a hot one for the coming election because the opposition parties have exploited it to the hilt, and there are indications that they are benefitting from it, particularly PAS.

What is uncertain now is the extent the Anwar trial has united or divided Umno. What is also uncertain is how much it has restored the confidence of the people.

What is certain, is that the present Umno leaders would have to work

harder to show that whatever action taken against Anwar were justified.

If not, said an observer, Umno and the BN would have a difficult task in several states in the forthcoming general election, particularly in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis and Pulau Pinang.

The year 1999 is therefore a busy one for Malaysia and a challenging time for politicians. -- Bernama

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