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New round of speculation of early general election

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BREAKING fast with the Prime Minister in Kelantan has always been a pretty casual affair.

Guests gather under tents erected on a school field where they sit cross-legged on mats and tuck into trays of food with their fingers.

Last Thursday evening's buka puasa in Machang was no different and the 5,000-odd guests included almost everybody who is somebody in Kelantan Umno.

The VVIPs were seated on a slightly raised platform and this explained why the absence of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah was quickly noticed.

The Kelantan prince had a prior appointment in Kuala Lumpur and had flown out after the Kelantan Umno liaison meeting in the afternoon.

According to the dinner talk, it was Tengku Razaleigh's tactful solution to a rather delicate situation.

The Sultan - the Tengku is his uncle - was also hosting a buka puasa function at the palace and, given the nature of Kelantan politics, it would have been quite impossible for Tengku Razaleigh to attend one function without appearing to slight the host of the other.

That was one major topic of conversation that evening. The other was whether the Prime Minister would call an early general election.

Yes, a fresh round of speculation - the guessing game - over prospects of early polls has begun.

The first round had spun off shortly after the economic meltdown set in. The argument then was that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would seek a fresh mandate in order to tackle the economic crisis, and none were more keen than the opposition parties to go to the polls.

The opposition is still very keen and this current round of speculation is no less confounding, or as they say in the local slang, "pening kepala" or "very headache".

For a start, there is the confidence bubbling from both sides of the political divide.

Pas thinks it has Kelantan in one pocket and Terengganu, Perlis and Kedah in the other, while the Barisan Nasional is determined to maintain its sturdy control in Parliament and the other State Legislative Assemblies.

The DAP, on the other hand, is declaring that the BN's two-thirds majority will soon be a thing of the past.

Those looking for hints and signals of a polls date will no doubt closely monitor the Prime Minister's countrywide tour which is scheduled to kick off next month in Perak.

"It is also a serious bid to regain public confidence in the Government - that, by itself, is a sign of approaching elections," says former academic Ahmad Shabery Chik.

There is a single-mindedness about this particular tour in the way Dr Mahathir has relinquished his Home and Finance portfolios so that he can concentrate on political matters.

His ostensible aim on his coming tour is to explain the country's political and economic situation to the rakyat.

But, as in past tours, it will also be an opportunity to gauge the ground feeling and to listen to feedback from State BN leaders.

And based on this feedback, it is said, the Prime Minister will be in a better position to decide on a date for the general election.

Those who put much measure to the impending tour say it points to an early general election - as early even as in six months - because they say "there's a limit to how many times PM can go around the country".

And this, despite the BN's mandate holding good until April 22 next year with another 60 days to call for election after Parliament is dissolved.

Others say the date will hinge largely on two factors - the outcome of the Sabah elections and the economy.

"The Sabah elections will have to take place first before we can even start speculating about the big one," says Ahmad Said, a prominent figure in Terengganu Umno.

Elections in Sabah are rather finger-biting events compared to the predictable outcomes of national polls and the more honest analysts say that at this point in time, the election there may go either way - to BN or Parti Bersatu Sabah.

However, this time around, a BN win in Sabah is more crucial than ever for the sort of signals it will send to the rest of country.

"It's the psychological effects we are thinking about," says Wanita Umno member Rosnah Majid.

The popular argument so goes: if BN comes out well in Sabah, then we are looking at an early general election. Otherwise, it could be as late as even next year.

The other key factor is, of course, the economy, particularly when it comes to the middle-class vote.

Predicts Senator Datuk Zainuddin Maidin: "General election only when economic recovery is well in place."

Zam, as this former newspaper editor is known by, thinks the signs of recovery are already there, pointing to the astonishing response to the House Ownership Campaign and even the crowds at buka puasa buffet in posh hotels.

"People seem more confident about spending money than say a year ago," he adds.

Says an MCA politician: "Things are looking up ... recovery plans are in place, interest rates are very favourable to exporters and wages have not increased. If only the stock market index will hit 700 ..."

Underlying these two main issues is the political factor centring around the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim trial.

The sense of shock that erupted after the sacking of Anwar as Deputy Prime Minister, and particularly after he appeared in court with a black eye, has somewhat subsided.

There are individuals and groups who are still mad but generally, feelings have cooled from white-hot anger to what can best be described as an undercurrent of discontent.

And it is this political undercurrent which both DAP and Pas are busy tapping into.

"The winds of change are very strong," says Pas vice-president Mustapha Ali.

But says DAP MP for Cheras Tan Kok Wai: "It's less a desire for change than (a desire) for a stronger opposition."

Mustapha was one of those who had earlier on predicted that elections would be held by the end of last year. He says now: "Maybe next year."

When the general election will be held will also depend on the political situation within Umno.

Umno is the backbone of the BN and it is natural that the BN would want to go into battle with its backbone firm and steady.

The top hierarchy of Umno has stayed intact over the Anwar issue but it is no secret that the middle tier and the grassroots are still trying to come to terms with what has happened.

In fact, the appointment of "Mr Nice Guy" Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Deputy Prime Minister - Zam describes him as a "coolant for Umno" - is seen as a move towards resolving the current phase that Umno is going through.

Zam, an avowed Mahathir loyalist, suggests that this will probably be the last election led by Dr Mahathir.

"He is sincere about retiring ... I believe him. He will push for economic recovery and lead the BN through the elections. But I don't see him staying on very long after the next Umno election," says Zam.

The opposition is probably quite aware of this and its worry is surely that Dr Mahathir will give it all he has got.

And that can only mean one thing - Dr Mahathir will be a more formidable political opponent than ever before.

But those inclined towards an early general election ought to remember that there have only been two snap elections in Malaysian electoral history.

The first was in 1978 when Tun Hussein Onn, after succeeding Tun Razak Hussein, went to the polls more than a year before it was due. The second was in 1982, shortly after Dr Mahathir took over from Hussein.

The rest took place well after four years, whereas the 1969 and 1974 elections stretched past five years.

Incidentally, the guessing for the 1995 general election began more than a year before it was called and a full 20 months before it was due.

The stock exchange, which was then a vibrant indicator of national polls, is no longer as hot this time around, says an MCA politician.

Instead, he suggests cheekily: "First, look at Special Branch reports. Then study Information Department reports. Finally, check the feng shui."

And what does the most erudite feng shui master Lillian Too have to say to this?

"I don't predict general elections!"

But what Too does - and it is said, does very well too - is work out the positive and negative periods over a year. Last year, she saw the fall of a prominent figure; in fact, her calculations were off by only a day.

Among her calculations for 1999: "The period around September-October ... it's not going to be a good time."

Says Penang MCA chairman Datuk Dr Sak Cheng Lum: "It's no longer a question of trying to make predictions or reading the PM's mind."

"The point is elections are going to take place within the next 16 months. For those who have been working, the question is how to run this final lap."

Most Umno politicians are also resigned to the fact that they are not going to get any hints from Dr Mahathir.

"We'll find out the same way as everybody - through the media," says an Umno supreme council member.

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