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No better time to hold an election

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THE new Kelantan Umno chief, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, returned to the State on June 24 wearing his new hat. According to Press reports, he received a rousing welcome at Sultan Ismail Petra Airport.

A week later, the man who appointed him to the post - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - made an equally interesting visit to a politically significant place.

He went to Permatang Pauh, the parliamentary constituency of his former deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. He too received a warm welcome.

The important speeches at the Umno general assembly (June 18-20), the appointment of Tengku Razaleigh, the revamp of the Umno headquarters and the visit to Permatang Pauh - these are not events that will easily escape public attention.

They strengthen speculation about an early general election. Some say in less than six months; otherwise why should the Government space out the payment of the RM600 special bonus to civil servants and pensioners over six monthly instalments of RM100 each.

And what better time to think of an election than when the economy is recovering and the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange Composite Index breaking through one psychological barrier after another.

The better than expected result in the Sabah election in March is another boost. The State-based Opposition, Parti Bersatu Sabah, was humiliated and the big-talking Pas lost deposits in all the six seats it contested.

The DAP, which has been repeatedly humbled by Sabah voters, abstained completely and the new State party, Parti Bersekutu Sabah, lost every seat it contested. And last week, its leader, the former Barisan Nasional Chief Minister, Datuk Harris Salleh, quit the party.

Having the general election now or in the immediate future may enable the BN to tap the favourable sentiments of the Sabah voters. Waiting too long may rob the victory of its shine.

With 20 parliamentary seats at stake, Sabah can be both a boon and bane for the BN. It now holds 12 seats.

Time and resources are in favour of the ruling coalition. The Government does not have to call an election until June next year when the term of the current Parliament ends.

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BUT more often than not, it opted for earlier polls. The last election in 1995 was held six months ahead of time and the one in 1990 was nine months.

The earliest general election was in 1978. It was called more than a year ahead of time principally to overcome the problem caused by the sacking of Pas from the BN.

So there is nothing to suggest the Government cannot or will not call an early election this time around.

Or it may want to wait a while to see how the Opposition coalition shapes up. The BN is really quite good at gauging the strength of its opponents and at exploiting their weaknesses.

It has the experience of handling all kinds of opposition electoral pacts and platforms since 1955, when the first legislative assembly election was held under the auspices of the British Colonial Government.

The three-party Alliance won 51 of the 52 seats at stake. Pas, then

called Parti Islam Setanah Melayu or Pan Malayan Islamic Party, won a solitary seat in Krian, Perak.

But the notion that the BN has a monopoly on the votes is incorrect. What it has is the support of the majority of the voters. The Opposition parties, on the other hand, have not been able to put together a credible alternative because their policies and objectives are often very different.

This is only to be expected because many of the Opposition parties originated as splinters of parties or groups that later merged.

Pas, for instance, was formed by the extremist and disgruntled elements of Umno and groups aligned to it.

They wanted Umno to adopt an extreme form of Islam and opposed the growing collaboration with the Chinese and Indians via the then Malayan Chinese Association and Malayan Indian Congress.

Pas was preceded by Parti Negara which was formed by Datuk Onn Jaafar when he quit the Umno leadership in 1951. He left Umno after his proposal to open the membership of the party to non-Malays was rejected by the general assembly.

Another significant splinter party of Umno was Parti Melayu Semangat 46 which was formed by Tengku Razaleigh in 1989 and dissolved in 1996 when he returned to Umno.

Although Parti Keadilan Nasional is not led by a former Umno leader, a significant number of its leaders and members come from Umno.

The MCA and MIC had their share of splits that resulted in the formation of new parties. But only Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia has survived. It is today a member of the BN.

A study of the voting trends from 1959 suggests that just over half the electorate constantly voted for the BN and its Alliance predecessor. But what the coalition has been able to do is get enough multi-ethnic voters to back it in order to secure a two-thirds majority in Parliament.

In the first post-Independence election in 1959, the Alliance essentially faced Pas and the Socialist Front. It garnered 51.8 per cent of the vote and 74 seats in the 104-seat Parliament against Pas' 21.3 per cent and 13 seats.

The Socialist Front and other smaller parties received 22.1 per cent. The Socialists won nine seats and the Ipoh-based Seenivasagam brothers' Peoples Progressive Party won four seats. Today the PPP is a BN partner.

In the 1964 election, the year that Dr Mahathir was first elected MP, the Alliance increased its popular vote to 58.5 per cent by forcing Pas down to 14.6 per cent but allowing other parties to win 26.2 per cent.

It increased its parliamentary seats to 89 while cutting down Pas' representation to nine, and two each for the Socialist Front and PPP.

But in 1969, everything seemed to have gone wrong for the Alliance. Parliament was enlarged to 144 seats, the economy was not doing well and more Opposition parties joined the fray. The alliance with Sarawak- and Sabah-based parties was still nascent.

To add to the problem, the National Language Policy, which came into force in 1967, was widely exploited by the newcomer DAP to turn the non-Malays against the Alliance, in particular against the MCA.

Pas, on the other hand, accused Umno of not being firm enough on the issue and demanded a review of the citizenship policy.

A major miscalculation on the part of the Government was to allow a long campaign - up to six weeks.

The result shocked the Alliance. It won only 44.9 per cent of the popular vote and 74 seats in Parliament. The DAP received 11.9 per cent and Pas 14.6 per cent. They won 13 and 12 seats, respectively. The Sarawak- and Sabah-based parties, which were in a loose coalition with the

Alliance, won the rest.

What happened after that might be history but it is still fresh in the memories of many people who went through it.

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THE trauma of the defeat and the fear of the Malays losing control of the country, encouraged the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, who succeeded Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1970, to invite Pas to join the new coalition he was putting together - the Barisan Nasional.

Hence the 1974 general election saw Pas, Gerakan and the PPP in the enlarged coalition, leaving only the DAP and Sarawak National Party in opposition. The BN garnered 60.7 per cent of the vote and 135 seats in the 154-seat Parliament.

The DAP increased its share of the vote to 18.3 per cent which translated into nine seats. SNAP won nine and the late (Tan Sri) Dr Tan Chee Khoon's Pekemas got a solitary seat.

In the 1978 general election, Pas returned to the Opposition, having been expelled from the coalition at the end of 1977.

It managed to win only five parliamentary seats and 15.5 per cent of the vote against the BN's 57.2 per cent and 130 seats. The DAP increased its popular vote marginally to 19.1 per cent but won 16 seats.

The 1982 general election was Dr Mahathir's first as Prime Minister and the BN won 60.5 per cent of the parliamentary vote and 132 seats. The support for Pas declined to 14.5 per cent but the DAP's vote rose marginally to 19.6 per cent. Pas was able to retain its parliamentary representation at five but the DAP was reduced to nine. Eight went to independent candidates.

In 1986, the contest was essentially between the BN and DAP. Capitalising on the recession and playing up issues related to the Chinese language and education, the DAP raised its stake in the enlarged Parliament to 24 but risked igniting communal hatred. It was the DAP's best ever achievement.

The BN took 148 seats in the 177-seat Parliament but Pas, unable to take advantage of either the economic crisis nor the language issue, was reduced to one.

The 1990 election was perhaps the best ever for the Opposition. The split in Umno and the formation of Semangat 46 gave them a new leadership and a sense of direction. Tengku Razaleigh played a key role in cobbling together a united Opposition.

The last minute betrayal by PBS, a BN partner in Sabah, immediately deprived the coalition of 14 parliamentary seats. The final tally gave the BN 127 seats in the enlarged 180-seat Parliament. The DAP won 20; PBS, 14; Semangat 46, eight; and Pas, seven.

Even then the BN's popular vote remained above 50 per cent - 53.4 per cent to be exact. The DAP's, however, fell to 17.6 per cent from a high of 21.1 per cent in 1986.

The 1995 election was dubbed a "Mahathir show". With the economy booming, 65.15 per cent of the vote and 162 parliamentary seats went to the BN - the highest in history.

The DAP managed to keep only nine seats; PBS, eight; Pas, seven; and Semangat 46, six.

Although the coming election is going to be different due to the developments in Umno and the economy, it is not something the Prime Minister and the BN is unfamiliar with.

Dr Mahathir has gone through many crises before, including losing his seat to Pas in the 1969 general election, and survived.

While he is not taking the current crises lightly, he is unlikely to panic as the Opposition is hoping.

Furthermore, the Government has the luxury of time. But the Prime Minister may not want to push the deadline too close to the expiry of the current term.

He is also not likely to give in to the demand by the Opposition to prolong the campaign period, which, in reality, is quite immaterial as all parties have been campaigning for months.

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