

01/08/1999

Political rivals warm up as waiting game drags on

Joceline Tan

DATUK Ibrahim Ali, the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, is currently one of the hottest tickets on the Umno ceramah circuit.

The garrulous Senator from Kelantan is deluged by so many speaking invitations that, he says, if he were to accept all, he would be speaking three times a night from now until December.

In Pendang, Kedah, recently, a stone's throw from Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor's territory, Ibrahim drew a crowd that startled even local Pas leaders.

Part of his ceramah blitz has been on behalf of the high-profile Anti-Defamation Committee chaired by him.

He calls it Pidato Memerangi Fitnah (Rally against Slander) and adds in that unrestrained way of his: "When I'm speaking on the west coast, I'm like Ziana Zain.

"On the east coast, I'm like Michael Jackson ... more kasar, on the attack, boom-bam-boom-bam. I spare nobody."

His crowd appeal has to do with the fact that he is not bashful about ridiculing himself.

At one ceramah, he said he did not mind the Opposition labelling him a katak (frog) and even anointed himself the "Prince of Frogs".

He said the Opposition had their share of frogs such as a well-known woman politician who left Umno for Parti Melayu Semangat 46, then rejoined Umno only to leave again for Parti Keadilan Nasional.

He crowned her "Mother of all Katak", whereas Fadzil was titled "Datuk Katak" because he had left Umno for Pas.

Despite Ibrahim's zeal at what is seen as electioneering activity, he is actually quite unconcerned about whether the general election will be held soon or later.

"The idea is to be ready," he says.

Nevertheless, many MPs had attended the last sitting of Parliament thinking it would be their last before the polls.

Others, especially those in the Opposition parties hope it will be soon, preferably, as soon as September.

"Actually, we are already in full swing," says Ronnie Liu, a second-echelon leader of the Democratic Action Party (DAP).

In the past month or so, the bulk of incoming calls on his handphone has been less about work - he is a copywriter in a major advertising house - than about politics.

"I've been getting so many calls asking for flags and posters," he says.

Apparently, one of the requests came from some gung-ho party members who are planning to plant a huge flag of the "DAP rocket" on Bukit Mewah, up in Genting Highlands.

"It's a very high peak, but they want to climb it ... so that people who go to Genting will see the flag," he says.

The DAP election machinery has been humming at near top speed for some time now even as the party's internal troubles make the news. There are ceramah almost every other day and secretary-general Lim Kit Siang is said to be on a "very, very tight" schedule these days.

The Opposition parties, one might say, have never been as ready and raring to go.

Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pas) has been predicting a September election since early this year and they have stepped up their ceramah - there are

dozens every night all over the country - which have become a crucial form of getting their message across.

"The climate is just right now for us, especially in Kelantan.

"Everything is ready ... the party, our members. There's nothing more we can do and we are just waiting for Parliament to be dissolved," says its Kelantan election organising chief Wan Abdul Rahim Wan Abdullah.

There are several reasons why the Opposition favours early polls, chief among which is that they want people, especially the Malays, to decide while the Anwar Ibrahim issue is still fresh on their minds.

"They know the longer you wait, the more feelings cool and people start rationalising their own situation. That's the reality," says former academic Shabery Chik.

Shabery is, presumably, talking about the infamous Malaysian memory, or rather, the lack of it.

As it is, the crowds that used to wait outside the High Court to shout "Reformasi!" as Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was driven past, has long disappeared while his trial sees diminishing interest with curiosity revived only when more sensational evidence was revealed in court recently.

It is also not easy for the Opposition parties to stay on ready-to-go mode for too long.

"If we wait too long, our people may get tired, even sick," says Liu.

About the only party which might actually welcome a late election is newcomer Keadilan; the party badly needs more time to organise themselves on the ground.

So what makes the Opposition so confident that the Prime Minister is likely to call for election sooner than later?

According to Pas vice-president Mustafa Ali, the BN Government may want to avoid the possible repercussions from the conclusion of the one-year moratorium on capital outflow in the country in September.

Mustafa, who at 56 is one of the most seasoned Pas figures, also thinks the ruling coalition would want to go to the polls on the existing voter roll which would not include the 650,000 signed up during this year's voter registration exercise.

The figure is a phenomenal increase from the 700,000 registered between 1995 and 1998.

As a result, there have been all kinds of speculation about the political persuasion of these new voters, that they are angry young voters.

"They will vote for us," Mustafa says confidently.

But, for many Opposition politicians, the most compelling suggestion of early polls has less to do with capital controls or new voters than with the way the BN-friendly media has been playing up political issues.

"So much negative news about the Opposition," complains Liu.

But says Wanita Umno's Rosnah Majid: "Actually, now is still the soft part.

"Wait till we really start attacking."

This journalist-turned-politician insists that if Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad waits longer before calling for election, it is to enable the economy to really get back on its feet.

"Recovery is very important to the Government.

"I don't think the PM would want the process jeopardised by anything including a fiery election campaign," she says.

The thinking among many Umno people, too, is to wait a while more, at least until the fruits of the economic upturn start trickling down to the ordinary person on the street and especially in the kampung.

"When business in pasar malam and the eating stalls really pick up ...

that is the best signal for election," says Rosnah.

Then, there are those who say the Government would want to go to the polls with really impressive growth figures.

But first, they say, the KLSE composite index should hit 1,000 points and stay there.

As usual, Kelantan-based politicians think that much depends on whether or not Kelantan is ready.

Pas, they say, is the main enemy, so if Umno wishes to settle the question of who the Malays want, then it is best done in the Malay heartland and in the State where Pas is now in control.

"The PM really wants to get Kelantan back," says Ibrahim.

And for those who think that Dr Mahathir cannot afford to wait too long, there are just as many who think time is on his side.

Besides, notes a Kuala Lumpur lawyer, the Prime Minister knows the importance of letting the Opposition wear themselves out.

"It's only to be expected. Once you say you are a Government-in-waiting, you subject yourself to ever greater scrutiny by the media and by Malaysians.

"People begin to realistically assess your policies ... syariah law, your statements about women, your economic know-how.

"Their inconsistency is getting increasingly clear," says the lawyer.

For instance, the lawyer adds, intense scrutiny has revealed that Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, may be perfectly suitable for rural, Malay politics with his folksy wisdom and taciturn ways, but "raise the man to national assessment and his intellectual limitations become glaringly obvious".

In the meantime, both sides have a tactical weapon each for firing in August.

The Prime Minister is scheduled to visit China in the third week of August.

The thought of pictures showing Dr Mahathir and Chinese leader Jiang Zemin sharing a stately handshake and splashed on the front pages of all the Chinese newspapers is sending shivers down the spine of Chinese Opposition figures.

"And if MCA announces the approval of one or more Chinese schools, that's it ... kaput for us!" says a Penang DAP politician.

Well, not really, because Lim Guan Eng - DAP's tactical missile - is likely to walk out of Kajang Prison on Aug 25.

Party people say he will probably spend a week with his family, then it's off on a nationwide roadshow that they hope will win support for the party.

Even Pas people are hoping that he will speak in their areas.

Going by past experience, if September passes without an election, the guess will probably shift to November (school holidays and after an election Budget in October).

Otherwise, it will probably be after December (Ramadan), possibly in January (after Hari Raya and before the Lunar New Year).

If it still has not taken place, it will probably be after the Lunar New Year and before the Muslims leave for the Haj in March.

And if it still has not happened, then there's nothing left to guess because Parliament has to be dissolved by April 22 and election called within 60 days.

By now, most BN leaders know better than to try to read the Prime Minister's mind because he is notorious for keeping important decisions close to the chest.

The election date, says a State Umno leader in a resigned tone, is "between God and Mahathir".

Or as a former Cabinet figure puts it: "He never says when. He just tells you to get ready. Then he on's (puts on) the switch".  
(END)