

15/05/1999

Press persists with a ritual which provides no definitive answer

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A RITUAL resumed yesterday as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad concluded the second-leg of a nationwide tour to explain current political issues.

This is a seasonal but persistent question on the election date that the Press ask Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad whenever the polls are "thought" to be near.

The queries are crafted and phrased in roundabout ways, as the unmistakable reality has long dawned on the reporters - there will be no definitive answer.

Reigniting the ritual queries this time is the political backdrop, the fact that the polls must be held by June next year, and the bold predictions.

A Chinese vernacular daily has reportedly declared that the polls would be called next month. The foreign Press has been at it for some time now.

Furthermore, when in Ranau, Sabah yesterday, the Prime Minister alluded to the magical "coming election" in his speech, only to swiftly add: "Not that I am campaigning for the election prematurely."

Thus, when the Press assembled at the hotel he was staying in later in the day, it was pointed out that his nationwide tour (Dr Mahathir journeys to Johor next week) would inevitably fuel speculations about the general election.

"Please shed some light," was the request.

An expert at dodging these questions and having produced quotes like "I haven't got the inspiration" in the run-up to the 1995 general election, the Prime Minister said yesterday:

"It will be held by April 2000 ... sometime before that. The newspaper people are very clever. They eliminate the days which we cannot hold elections.

"They look into the weather, and all that, and they come up with very accurate predictions. So, I don't have to tell you."

(The previous general election was in April, 1995 but the June 2000 deadline is based on the first post-election Dewan Rakyat sitting)

Asked whether he was more prepared now to hold the general election, Dr Mahathir said: "I am always prepared to hold the election."

To another question, he said various factors have to be considered before a decision is made on when the election would be held, telling the reporter:

"So, I cannot tell you yet. But I will whisper to you ..." The Sabah-based reporter duly said "Thank you."

So ends another round of "banter", for now that is, as it is sure to crop up time and again in future Press conferences.

Barisan Nasional secretary-general Datuk Mohamed Rahmat held court after yesterday's Press conference at the Pan Pacific Sutera.

When it was pointed out that since Dr Mahathir's nationwide tour would take a few months to conclude, would the polls be some time in September, Mohamed replied:

"No ... after this round of nationwide tour, there will be another series. There will be one, two, three rounds."

The truth of the matter is, only the Prime Minister knows but pundits and analysts, whatever these experts are known as, will persist with speculation and prediction.

Elaborating on some of the pertinent issues, an Umno Supreme Council

member said yesterday: "Sabah does not pose a problem (to the BN). It is the Peninsula and it concerns the Malay voters."

Also, nuances will be studied and leads or perceived hints hunted and explored to the maximum. Personalities, meanwhile, will continue to make news.

In this context, Dr Mahathir received various declarations of support during his visit to Sabah.

The organisers brought out the famous Bajau horsemen for the welcoming ceremony. Since the 70 horses are based in Kota Belud, 60km from Kota Kinabalu, they were taken to the State capital in 35 pick-up trucks.

At a thanksgiving gathering on Thursday night, all 20 Umno divisions rolled out banners backing Dr Mahathir.

In Ranau, Tan Sri Kasitah Gaddam, a Federal Minister and Kinabalu Umno divisional head, openly asked the Prime Minister to stop mentioning about quitting.

When asked to comment, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't want to speak about my resignation. On the other hand, other people have got other ideas that I should resign.

"So, I have to speak sometimes, much though I dislike talking about my future."

Asked whether he was inspired by such support, the Prime Minister said: "I appreciate it. It makes my work easier."

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