

Good reasons for PM to hold early polls

STAR - 5 MAY 2002

ALTHOUGH there are no strong hints at the moment of an early general election, many politicians are not dismissing the possibility that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad may call for one next year.

And there are plenty of good reasons why he could call for a snap election before the Barisan Nasional's full five-year term expires in the year 2005.

Unlike the scenario in 1998, when Dr Mahathir's stature was severely tested after the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from Umno and the government, the reverse has taken place.

Dr Mahathir's popularity is at an all-time high while the opposition front comprising PAS, Parti Keadilan Nasional and Parti Rakyat Malaysia is in disarray. Keadilan itself is struggling to keep intact following a series of resignations of its top leaders.

The popularity of PAS has been deeply eroded after the Sept 11 attacks in New York, particularly when it called for a *jihad* (holy war) against the United States for retaliating against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The involvement of several PAS grassroots members in the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia jolted many Malaysians, particularly moderate Muslims, and caused many to reassess the kind of politics propagated by the Islamist party.

The DAP, understanding the sentiments of its core support among the non-Muslims, tried to save itself by pulling out of the opposition pact but it has yet to recover from the effects of working with PAS in the 1999 general election.

It took a beating from Chinese voters, with several top DAP guns being defeated.

The Barisan Nasional component parties, particularly the, MCA and Gerakan, need to take advantage of a weak DAP. Come September, when the memories of the first anniversary of the New York tragedy are replayed, strong emotions would be evoked again.

But the Sept 11 factor would fade away among Malaysians if Barisan decides to wait longer to call for elections. One week in politics is a long time, as the saying goes.

On the economic front, there is now renewed interest in the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange and there is talk that the foreign buyers would return strongly to our counters.

The property market, especially at the high end, seems to have rebounded with news reports of buyers having to ballot for semi-detached and bungalow units in freehold areas of the Klang Valley.



Despite initial fears of massive retrenchments following the slow-down in the United States, the situation has been well managed by our government.

Dr Mahathir's standing in the international community has changed tremendously since Sept 11. If he was treated with suspicion previously for his strong actions against suspected extremists, particularly in using the Internal Security Act, there is now greater understanding.

He is seen as a moderate Muslim leader in a progressive Islamic country who wields considerable clout among Islamic nations. The hosting of the recent Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting in Kuala Lumpur has certainly boosted his credentials.

Clearly, the US is seeing Malaysia in a different light with the country now being described by the White House as the regional "beacon of stability."

Next week, Dr Mahathir will travel to the United States where he will meet President George W. Bush. The high-profile meeting is important because it will ease the strained relationship between the two countries.

Dr Mahathir will have a busy schedule, including a meeting with the influential editors at The Washington Post and meetings with White House officials and senators.

On the local front, the MCA will need some time to work on the peace agenda. All players at all levels must realise that there is more at stake than a fight over party posts.

A divided MCA will not be good for Barisan as it gears itself for the next general election.

Gerakan must also appreciate that it needs the MCA during the election and that the fight in the MCA does not benefit the Penang-based party.

There is still a great degree of unhappiness among Chinese voters towards the MCA for its bitter factional fight. Party leaders, whether they like it or not, have to come together.

Unity gatherings involving grassroots leaders and C&E guilds can be organised to forge unity and to show that they can close ranks to face a common enemy.

Within Umno, its elections (one due next year) have always been exciting affairs but party members may spend too much time campaigning, which would not augur well for Barisan.

It is speculated that Dr Mahathir may want to call for the general election before the Umno polls.

Another factor to consider would be the progress of the delineation exercise by the Election Commission involving the creation of more parliamentary and state constituencies.

The proposal, once completed, will have to be approved by Parliament. These new seats would then have to be identified before the general election is called.

But the consensus among many Barisan leaders is that the general election is not that far away and preparations should start now - it is a perception that is shared by the Opposition.

Last week, Dr Mahathir dropped a hint by saying he will be defending his Kubang Pasu seat in the next general election.

□ Wong Chun Wui can be reached at onthebeat@thestar.com.my