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Speculation on election date rife but leaders give no clear signs yet

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REACTION to the appointment of Datuk Seri Najib Razak as Deputy Prime Minister has been encouraging.

The Kuala Lumpur stock market, too, responded positively. The nation is generally in a "good mood" since the smooth transfer of power from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

All in all, the indications are good for any leader to go to the polls.

It is, therefore, not surprising that speculation is rife that the 11th general election will be called soon, with some grabbing on any single political activity such as the scheduled BN supreme council meeting on Thursday as the one which will see the nation's leadership deciding on the dissolution of Parliament.

While such speculation is common, it is quite simplistic to imply that Thursday's meeting is going to determine when the election is going to be called or that election is just round the corner, perhaps before the first quarter ends.

Sure, it will discuss the general election, as it has been doing in its previous meetings. But, said BN secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat, it would be done "in general terms".

He said there were still many specific issues that had yet to be discussed and finalised before the BN leadership could set the date.

These, he said, included finalising the distribution of seats among component parties, especially after the re-delineation of parliamentary boundaries which saw demographic changes which might result in the swapping of seats among the BN partners.

"Only after that can we start finalising the candidate list.

"Be rest assured, our Thursday meeting will not decide when the election will be called," said Mohamed.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib concurred. "No doubt, our Umno machinery is already moving but there is much to be done before the election date can be decided."

The question is, what led to the speculation of the election being called in the first quarter, apart from the "feel good" aspects pointed out earlier?

For one, the fact that the Sabah Government's term should end by April 12.

Given the fact that the BN leadership has indicated that it wants to hold the State election simultaneously with the Federal polls, then it only stands to reason that the general election will have to be called by April.

However, the election laws allow for polling to be held within two months after the State Assembly is dissolved, which means that the BN leadership has at least until June 12.

There are other reasons the election may not be called soon as speculated despite the fact that most of the BN component leaders at State level have submitted their lists of candidates to the Federal leadership.

This, said Muhammad, was not final. "Before we can discuss the lists, we have to settle the distribution of seats among component parties. If that has not been done, how can we decide on the candidacy?"

Mohamed shared his sentiments, admitting that though the coalition has held a dry run, it needs at least a couple more as practised in the past.

Party insiders also pointed out that the BN has yet to set up a

committee for its election manifesto which will then work closely with the secretaries-general and executive secretaries of the component parties.

"The process of fine-tuning the manifesto will take time before it can be tabled to the BN supreme council for endorsement," said an insider.

In the meantime, the guessing game continues, from simplistic arguments to analytical contentions on the election date.