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### Speculative futility

IT's become a ritual, and a tedious one at that. For the sixth time in the administration of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister of Malaysia, speculation has begun on the timing of the next general election. It will be just as accurate and useful as in the previous five episodes. It's just as revealing, however - although what it reveals is as unedifying.

Election speculation has become a parlour pastime; traditional warung chatter - mostly harmless but the very devil's workshop for idle minds. The salutary regularity of Malaysia's general elections - not one missed schedule in 50 years and 11 general elections - has come to mean that the statutory five but usually four years between them is, in effect, one long campaign. It dips into diminuendo or rises to crescendo, but never quite fades out.

There are real advantages to this, in that political complacency is something unheard-of in Malaysia. Knowing the inevitable emergence of the ballot boxes come hell or high water (or perhaps not the latter - elections are never held in the rainy season), Government and Opposition alike are rarely off their platforms in this country. Thus, whenever the date is announced and the duration of Parliament's dissolution is known, the entire national machinery and mindset shifts into election gear without unnecessary ruckus.

General election campaigns have been disastrously long or chafingly brief, but the people don't wait for an election campaign to make their decisions; they mull them all the time. The campaign period is merely a run-up to the day they declare those preferences for the next five-year term of government.

All of which renders idle contemplation even more pointless this time around, as the uncertainty of the date of the next election is thoroughly subsumed beneath the certainty that this will be the first election since 1964 that Dr Mahathir will not be contesting. The strange illogic of the current speculation has to do with whether Dr Mahathir would prefer to "lead" the Barisan Nasional to another election victory (without being a candidate himself), in order to "deliver" the next government to his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, presumably as some kind of going-away present. This would be a bit like the Gipper winning one for the team.

Dr Mahathir has now made it clear: Abdullah, not he, will decide not only the Cabinet over which Abdullah will preside, but when and how to take Abdullah's own administration to the nation's voters for endorsement and a mandate. Just as Dr Mahathir did with his first general election, 21 years ago. In the meantime, it would be best to focus on certainties - not the least of which are the exacting minutiae of a transfer of authority such as this country has not undergone in 22 years.