

Political talks fuel snap poll talk
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's unprecedented weekend talks with lawmakers in the ruling coalition have fuelled speculation of snap elections in the new year.

Najib, whose Barisan Nasional coalition was dealt an unprecedented rebuke in 2008 polls, does not have to go back to the people until 2013 but a confidence-boosting series of by-election wins has heightened speculation.

The premier, who came to power in 2009 after the humiliating poll results triggered the departure of his predecessor, played down the implication of Saturday's meetings with most of the coalition's 112 MPs.

He said the consultations were primarily focused on efforts to rejuvenate the BN, which during its half-century in power has acquired a reputation for being corrupt and ineffective.

"The general election is part of the long-term political transformation and what we have to face. What is important is to make BN a 'People First' party," he said according to the New Straits Times.

However, some lawmakers leaving the talks, during which they met with the premier in groups of three to report on affairs in their constituencies, said they believed the exercise was squarely aimed at preparing for polls.

"He wants to resolve all issues before the election. Maybe he will call for a snap general election," lawmaker Nur Jazlan Mohamed said, according to the Star newspaper.

The coalition has already held a December convention which insiders said was mainly focused on how to claw back the ground lost in 2008, when it ceded five states and a third of parliamentary seats to the opposition.

The opposition alliance has had its own troubles since those spectacular results, becoming mired in political infighting and distracted by sodomy charges against Anwar Ibrahim which he says are politically motivated.

The coalition, led by the dominant Umno which represents majority Muslim Malays, and embracing 12 other race-based parties, has ruled Malaysia since independence.

Large numbers of ethnic Chinese and Indian voters, many angry over rising "Islamisation" of the country, swung to Anwar's opposition, helping it deprive the coalition of its usual two-thirds majority in parliament.

After coming to power Najib launched a "One Malaysia" policy designed to boost racial unity which is credited with successfully luring back some support from ethnic minorities.

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