

Najib-Taib: A deal hedged in ambiguity
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COMMENT It must have been one of the more intricate and delicate understandings worked out between an incumbent prime minister, with an eye on the next general election, and a state chief seen as a liability that is hard to get rid of.

With polls in Sarawak due anytime soon, PM Najib Razak managed to work out with Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud what can be viewed as the best modus operandi under the circumstances.

Reading the entrails from the smokescreen of mushy statements that issued from both the PM and Taib in the Bidayuh enclave of Serian, outside Kuching, this morning, one can conclude that the bargain reached between them is hedged with ambiguity.

But one aspect of the deal must have been unequivocal.

Taib stays through the state elections where if the BN is seen as not having done well, he will have to vacate his position when the PM calls for a general election.

That was probably the gist of what Najib meant when he said that Taib had spoken to him of his wish to retire and left it to the PM to determine the date.

A general election is expected in June at the earliest. November and next February are also being touted as dates when Najib would call for a general election.

The PM is keen on a good showing by the BN in the looming general election, with possibly Sarawak's 31 parliamentary seats lodged safely under the federal coalition's tally. The federal coalition currently holds all but two seats.

If federal BN's Sarawak pillar, SUPP, takes a pasting from the DAP in the state polls that are expected next month, and if PKR adds to its present solitary seat, Sarawak will have a new CM before November or next February, when the general election is called.

A poor Sarawak BN showing in the state polls will certainly push the date of the general election to November or next February.

Hence Taib's continued stay as CM revolves around the Sarawak BN's performance in the imminent state polls.

Besieged by graft allegations

In the last poll in May 2006, the BN lost eight seats to the opposition. DAP garnered 6 and PKR 1, with one seat falling to an independent.

It was the best showing by the opposition since the 1991 state polls when Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak failed to better their 15-seat haul of the 1987 poll.

With Taib virtually besieged by allegations of widespread graft, the coalition he heads goes into the state polls with one hand tied behind its back.

Worse, the prevailing controversy over the impoundment of 30,000 copies of the Bahasa Indonesia version of the Bible, Al-Kitab, is expected to compound Sarawak BN's already considerable difficulties stemming from Dayak discontent over land issues.

Those liabilities are still reckoned as not enough to submerge the enormous advantages enjoyed by the incumbents in elections in a state whose geographical terrain is as formidable as Sarawak's.

But rarely has a combination of conditions been as less propitious as they presently are for the government of the day to repeat its thumping performances of the last 20 years, at least.

In sum, Taib has to pull off an emphatic victory for the Sarawak BN from the jaws of what looks likely to be a lame outing. Otherwise, it's curtains for him.

True, there are other aspects of the retirement deal for the durable 75-year-old state chief executive to be worked out. But these are all dependent on how Sarawak BN scores.

But as it stands, retire he will. It's just a question of how well and how soon.

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