

Najib, Taib caught in quit date wrangle
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For BN chairperson and Prime Minister Najib Razak, events of the last few weeks must have smacked as a troubling replay of a situation he encountered just before the last general election.

At that time, in a tete-a-tete with aides and senior journalists from state-owned media, the then deputy prime minister was told that S Samy Vellu, the former MIC leader, was going to be repudiated by the Indian voters. He should be jettisoned if BN wanted to retain the support of the community, a media ally advised Najib.

The latter felt the advice was too drastic and that the BN family spirit precluded its adoption. In the event, the soothsayer turned out to be prescient.

But whereas Samy Vellu, after much cajoling by the Umno top leadership, has bowed out well before the next general election, Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, widely viewed as a liability to the BN going into the state polls on April 16, is proving not just difficult to dislodge; he is decidedly cagey about the timing of his withdrawal.

The PM, in the face of mounting speculation that the BN is stuck with an albatross in Taib running into Saturday's ballot, had to reiterate he has an understanding with Taib as to when the latter would quit. He assured the public the tacit agreement will be adhered to in good time.

However, this has to be put against what Taib's special adviser, Adenan Satem, said the other day: that Taib cannot just go that quickly and would take three years to complete unfinished tasks and leave things in the good hands of a successor line-up.

Stage is set for post-election feud

A week, former British PM Harold Wilson famously observed, is a long time in politics. By that measure, three years is an eternity.

Clearly, the stage is being set for a post-election wrangle between Najib and Taib, the like of which has not been seen in Malaysian politics since 1995, when former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad outmanoeuvred Kedah Menteri Besar Osman Aroff, supplanting him with his loyalist, Sanusi Junid.

But before he was summarily replaced, Aroff, no pushover in the game of feint-and-manoeuvre, engaged in very public shadow play of several months' duration with Mahathir, setting tongues wagging in political salons at the spectacle of a determined PM being baulked by a recalcitrant state baron.

The matter was eventually decided when Mahathir, not one to be easily stayed when he has made up his mind, simply acknowledged in public what was clearly a pre-signed letter of resignation by Aroff and had Sanusi duly installed.

Aroff was stupefied at what seemed like a brazen display of sleight-of-hand politics. However, the episode had a sequel not necessarily vindicatory of Mahathir.

Aroff was a dab hand at ward politics. The manner of his extirpation caused grassroots level disenchantment in Kedah Umno.

The upshot: in the general election of 1999, Umno lost eight of 15 parliamentary seats to PAS whose 12 seats in the Kedah legislature meant Umno no longer enjoyed its customary two-thirds majority.

In the aftermath of the poll, Aroff was back in business, as a kind of adviser to Mahathir. The buffeting Mahathir took in his home state of Kedah expedited his retirement from the office of PM in October 2003.

What if the results are ambiguous?

Najib is not of Mahathir's brazen mettle. He reserves his skullduggery for foes like Anwar Ibrahim; against putative allies, he is apt to tread gingerly.

Hence speculation has begun to swirl over the likelihood of a prolonged wrangle, after Saturday's vote, between an elusive Taib and a prevaricating PM.

Of course, major reverses to Sarawak BN at the polls would mean Taib would be trapped in quicksand. In that event, he would not be able to stave off the inevitable: his hastened exit from office.

But what if the overall results are ambiguous, which would be the case if alone among the opposition, the DAP makes gains and the rest - PKR, Snap and Independents - are held at bay.

That eventuality would leave a corridor for Taib which he would exploit to ensure a future where he determines the choice of who gets to succeed him.

Necessarily, such a successor's prerequisites would have to be an ability to ensure for Taib legal immunity and corporate security.

This would be like the sequel to the episode of Osman Aroff's displacement in Kedah: individual will or interests are secured at the expense of group or coalition priorities.

In sum, where Taib Mahmud is concerned, the Najib administration is caught between a stone and a hard place.

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