

**Najib's Hamlet-like polls quandary**  
**Malaysiakini.com**  
**October 14 ,2011**  
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'To call' or 'Not to call' - Prime Minister Najib Razak appears to be in a Hamlet-like predicament with regard to the 13th general election.

Former prime minister and recurrent gadfly Dr Mahathir Mohamad seems resolute on this advice: Najib should go the full distance of predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's mandate, obtained in March 2008 which only expires five years hence.

But time is not on the present officeholder's side.

mahathir hulu langat 120408 press conferenceA swarm of potentially hostile factors - mounting fiscal debt, the worsening global economic situation, not to mention such inconveniences as the investigation in France into irregularities in arms procurement by Malaysia - combine to darken the outlook for Najib's longevity of tenure.

Mahathir has given his reasons for deferment. He holds that Umno is riven by factions and burdened by jealousy. Thus the party is not suitably placed to face polls.

Furthermore, he says the opposition seems to want to go the length of its current term in the four states it controls rather than accede simultaneously to the PM's apparent desire for early polls.

Delay, claims Mahathir, would compel Pakatan Rakyat to abide by the schedule prescribed by the constitution and needed by a reforming-wanting PM.

Mahathir's reasons are threadbare and - what's worse - suspect.

Machiavellian statecraft

No doubt, he was a titan of timing in the 22 years (1981-2003) he was PM. He paced his purposes - those he elected for himself and those imposed by circumstance - to events he carefully choreographed or that broke out on his watch which his proactive stance enabled him to get quickly on top of.

In that way he was not prey to the fatalism of former British PM Harold MacMillan (1956-64): When asked what he feared most while in office, MacMillan wearily replied, "Events, my dear boy, events."

The activist Mahathir was a skilled practitioner of a cardinal plank of Machiavellian statecraft: always keep a current of energy, via new initiatives and policies, going through the body politic.

That dynamic keeps both the friendly and the adversarial on notice that they are in thrall to a supremo that can play fast and loose with the pros and cons of fluid situations.

That way a leader is better able to leverage on fortuitous events that occur on his watch and better equipped to limit the damage of the unpropitious, always given that an amoral stance towards anything and anyone ensures that nothing sticky attaches to his Teflon flanks.

Such a leader is frequently in advance of events - a shaper of them rather than a flapper in their slipstream.

But what of leaders who are not of Machiavellian orientation?

They are likely to be reactive to events rather than proactive. And if they are not guided by a vision or by very much principle, they just do what is in their best interest to.

NONE You guessed right - that Najib's position. The PM-cum-finance minister has just crafted a munificent Budget that says if he has selected Idris Jala as his numbers man, he has not taken heed of him, particularly his warnings about the mounting threat of insolvency to national finances.

Maybe, the PM thinks he can listen to Idris later, which only means he has to call the polls sooner rather than later because, he may reckon, that after winning the polls he can raise the revenue that would finance his current munificence.

Dr M fears Umno may lose

Clearly, Mahathir is not impressed by this logic which was why he warned that the slumping global economic situation made Najib's confidence in the domestic economy's vibrancy precarious.

Mahathir's advice that Najib should allow time for his programmes to take effect is similarly misplaced because measures such as the abolishment and liberalisations of repressive laws proposed by the PM are just that - nostrums for a nose bleed rather than prescriptions for a polity gone putrid.

bersih rally petaling street 090711 Mahathir simply does not want Najib to go for a snap election because he fears Umno-BN is going to lose, on the Peninsula at least.

The size and multiracial composition of the crowds that turned up for the Bersih 2.0 march for electoral reform must have convinced hardened skeptics that Malaysian civil society's now 13-year-old push for sweeping political and economic reforms is headed for its inevitable tryst with national destiny.

A reactive supremo of incumbent power wielders, Umno-BN, at this hour can only pinch here and pare there, paddle here and tamp down there, in an effort to stanch the tide; he cannot stop it.

Worse, a Hamlet-like indecision over the timing of polls serves only to emphasise the underlying futility of doing too little too late.

The political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville was right: "The most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it reforms."

A hitherto slumbering citizenry is most insistent in its demands when it awakens to the reality of having being doped.