

Any time is a bad time for Najib
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COMMENT What would be a good time for Prime Minister Najib Razak to hold the 13th general election?

This question has risen with unnerving urgency now that the Umno-BN supremo is nearing the end of four years of the mandate his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had obtained, albeit in personal tenure ending fashion.

Last day of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Najib Abdul Razak takes over as prime minister in Putrajaya. Although the constitution provides for a five-year election cycle, Abdullah had set a pattern of waiting for only four before he decided to go to the polls.

There were exactly four years between his landslide victory in the 11th general election of March 2004 and his loss of Umno-BN's two-thirds majority in Parliament in the March 2008 polls, a descent that spelt disaster for Abdullah.

Four years between one general election and the next seems like a reasonable stretch; five is a stall.

The quadrennial cycle to elections is a good fit for the waxing and waning of political distempers.

These calculations are not arbitrary: issues have a way of simmering for some time before they reach a boil; four years appear about as long a time as one could keep them on a backburner.

Having taken over from a beleaguered Abdullah in April 2009, Najib has been waiting for the right time to seek a mandate that new PMs consider essential to gaining the legitimacy to make changes, especially after they have taken over from a predecessor who appears to have failed.

Road to hell is paved with good intentions

On assuming the reins, Najib would have reckoned to wait some time in which to introduce reforms before seeking a new mandate.

He spoke the jargon of reform, liberalised aspects of the economy, particularly the rules on equity ownership, and shaped up to introduce political reforms.

The latter score was where he ran into trouble.

Because Malaysia is not like China where the ruling communist party could liberalise the economy while maintaining tight control over the politics and appear to get away with it, Najib discovered that an undertow of stale thinking dogged his intention to liberalise the obsolete regimen of rules and regulations by which Malaysia's politics is conducted.

After belatedly conceding that the popular demonstration last July in support of the changes electoral reform pressure group, Bersih, were clamouring for needed to be reckoned with, Najib had, what in retrospect appeared as a fast-fading chance, to make good on his reform-seeking agenda.

He grabbed at it, or appeared to be intent on doing so.

In a Malaysia Day address last Sept 15, he announced there would be credible reforms to a host of repressive laws on internal security, public demonstrations and the press.

What eventuated, in respect of the Peaceful Assembly Bill 2011 tabled, amended and passed in

Parliament at its last sitting, only served to remind people that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Aspects of the Bill turned out to be worse than what the benighted military junta in Burma had condescended to introduce in their hapless country.

Malaysia on a par with Burma is bad enough; Malaysia worse than that mothballed country is intolerable.

Even as the image of Najib as credible reformer lay exposed by the end of last year as a delusion, the notion is taking hold among the electorate that power which is never transferred from one coalition to another - as distinct from being slightly shuffled among its existing holders - is power that will be abused.

Ministerial flunkies

That is the lesson the contagion of controversies now besieging the Najib administration would leave on voters.

After the recent steady pummeling suffered by the public through the disclosure of serial corruption in the government - in the National Feedlot Corporation, and among ministerial flunkies of the Najib administration - voters didn't have to have the brutally egregious manner in which the police tackled the student demonstration in Tanjung Malim yesterday added to its inventory of grievances with the government.

They now know what that gadfly, Raja Petra Kamarudin, doesn't seem to, that the government is in grave difficulties, not as a result of any complicated psychological or even ideological failings, but from the cumulative operation of factors that normally bring governments down.

These are economic anemia beyond the limits of plausible excuse or explanation; lack of new political ideas; middle-aged discovery of sterility at the lack of new ideas; and the inevitable boredom on the part of voters with old ideas and faces.

This deterioration is pretty remorseless once it starts and defies cosmetic repairs such as cabinet reshuffles.

This is why for Najib looking for a receptive time to call the general election is like George W Bush looking for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq - an elusive gleam in a jaundiced eye.

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