

Will Shahrizat be dropped ahead of the polls?

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Shahrizat Abdul Jalil's decision to go on a three-week sabbatical as a cabinet minister pending investigations into the National Feedlot Corporation (NFC) has set tongues wagging over whether she will return to work.

Three days after her announcement, veteran opposition lawmaker Lim Kit Siang cryptically predicted that Shahrizat will be dropped as a cabinet minister, but did not state why.

Najib at Pandan Umno AGMBN insiders told Malaysiakini that Shahrizat's link to the NFC scandal is a blight on Prime Minister Najib Razak's reformist image and allowing her to stay on would provide more fodder for a resurgent Pakatan Rakyat.

But as fate would have it, insiders say that Najib does have a convenient way out should he make good his promise to call polls only after the March session of parliament, when he is expected to table some of the showpiece reformist laws and repeal the much reviled Internal Security Act (ISA).

This is because Shahrizat, along with fellow cabinet ministers - Jamil Khir Baharom, Awang Adek Hussin and Koh Tsu Koon - will see their senatorship terms expire on April 8.

The Dewan Rakyat will begin its sitting in March through to April while the Dewan Negara sitting starts in April and is scheduled to continue until May.

Polling date matters

Should Najib choose not to have Shahrizat as part of his cabinet line-up ahead of the crucial polls, which would partially remove the impact of the NFC fiasco, he could decide not to extend her senatorship.

This scenario does not even require a replacement for Shahrizat's position as Najib could assign an acting minister for the women, family, and community development portfolio before the polls, said a BN source.

Najib can appoint any individual as a senator in the Dewan Negara for up to two consecutive or non-consecutive terms.

But should Najib call for polls before April 9, then the PM will have to do without the convenient opportunity to drop Shahrizat.

Two prominent political analysts consulted by Malaysiakini believe that Lim's prediction is likely off the mark because the dropping of Shahrizat - either through a cabinet reshuffle or by not extending Shahrizat's senatorship - will unsettle Umno.

NONE"Given the potential of a near-term election, it is unlikely that there will be a cabinet reshuffle, partly because he (Najib) will have the opportunity to do that after the election," said Ibrahim Suffian (right), head of independent pollster group Merdeka Centre.

Ibrahim added that if Najib was to go ahead with a cabinet reshuffle and dismiss some high-ranking ministers, he may face complications in getting the BN election machinery to function.

Emphasis on Umno stability

Echoing this, political analyst Khoo Kay Peng said the "element of surprise" of an early general election should not be discounted.

Preferably, Khoo added, Najib would want to avoid a reshuffle as it could potentially threaten the stability of Umno.

"If Najib drops a particular minister, he will be perceived as siding with a particular faction in Umno," he observed.

Umno's stability, said Khoo, is paramount since its political partners in BN remain weak and the electoral burden lies primarily on Umno.

dap set pak lah free forum 121006 khoo kay peng Khoo (left) pointed out that Shahrizat, who is a first-term senator, still wields considerable influence as Umno Wanita chief and Najib may not want to risk unsettling the balance in Umno.

The precarious balance could be seen particularly through the recent allegations against Umno ministers and deputy ministers, which Khoo speculated as being orchestrated by feuding factions within Umno.

Other Umno figures who have become embroiled in controversy are Jamil and Awang who have been accused of abusing zakat funds and receiving personal political financing respectively.

While Najib will "strike a balance" between internal politics and the election, Khoo added that should there be any fallout on the electorate from his decision, Umno will attempt to placate with handouts and trust schemes.

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