

Pakatan should steal a march on BN
MalaysiaKini.com
March 13,2012
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COMMENT Today's leadership council meeting of Pakatan Rakyat will in all likelihood opt for dissolution of state assemblies the coalition's controls in conjunction with the national parliament's dissolution widely expected to happen soon.

All of the first half of last year, the DAP-led Penang state government and its PKR-steered Selangor counterpart toyed with going the full distance of their five-year term should the federal government decide on calling a snap poll.

Then, the argument for not dissolving their state assemblies in tandem with parliament's was that Penang and Selangor needed the fullness of their term to display to greater advantage the superior finesse of their administration vis-à-vis their predecessors'.

The recent disclosure that Selangor enjoyed a RM1.5 billion surplus in revenue last year only served retrospectively to reinforce the merits of the case for not going simultaneously with the Feds on the question of snap polls.

A longer incumbency means more time in which to display an administration's relative merits.

Now, with just over a year to go on the current terms of both the federal parliament and individual state assemblies, the case for differently-timed dissolutions has withered.

Tactical one-upmanship

The PAS-led government of Kelantan was from the beginning unimpressed with the argument for delayed dissolution.

Last week's reiteration by Menteri Besar Nik Aziz Nik Mat (left) that Kelantan would dissolve simultaneously with the Feds has virtually decided the case against asymmetrical dissolutions.

So it would come as no surprise if the Pakatan leadership council at this afternoon's meeting elects to go for simultaneous dissolutions in tandem with the Feds' dissolution of parliament.

In this period widely regarded as the immediate prelude to the 13th general election, it would be wise for Pakatan to engage in a game of tactical one-upmanship over BN in areas where such opportunities avail.

Advance announcement of candidates is one area in which an advantage over BN can be garnered by Pakatan.

Speculation is strong that Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak is not going to adhere to the traditional seat-sharing arrangements the ruling coalition adopted since BN's inception in 1972.

Word has it that some quarters in Umno want their candidates to be fielded in constituencies that have marginal Malay majorities - seats hitherto allocated to other BN component parties which lost them in the last general election.

Najib's frequently emphasized call to BN components that they should only recommend winnable candidates is a broad hint that if they aren't able to come up with stellar nominees for these seats, Umno would want to contest them with presumably better alternatives.

Assessing the chances

This isn't going to do go down well with Umno's BN allies.

For example, MIC president G Palanivel (right) was rumoured as seeking a safe Malay-majority seat but was told there were no such seats to be had in the coming general election.

Palanivel is now frantically assessing his chances in seats such as Padang Serai (formerly held by a PKR MP who crossed over to the independent bench) in Kedah and Sungai Siput in northern Perak, long held by MIC's former titan Samy Vellu until he was defeated by PSM's Dr Jeyakumar Deveraj in the last election.

Suffice a decision by Umno to contest in seats hitherto allocated to their allies would invite apathy in stumping fervor on the part of the latter.

This is where even a partial ventilation of the Pakatan list of candidates in advance of Parliament's dissolution would place the opposition coalition in a tactically enhanced situation vis-à-vis BN.

Pakatan has seen itself chided for at least two years now for not being able to name a shadow cabinet to back their pretensions to Putrajaya.

Pakatan could not accede to the challenge of naming a shadow cabinet for the reason that in doing so it ran the risk of worsening latent intramural tensions and rivalries in their component parties, besides accentuating intra-coalition competitiveness.

But the act of naming even a partial list of candidates does not entail the same risks attendant upon a shadow cabinet ventilation.

The move would dispel doubts about the coalition's cohesion; raise the public profile of the named candidates, especially if these nominees are young; place Umno-BN at a comparative disadvantage, heightening pressure on a ruling coalition already saddled with a dissipated image; and give two million young and first-time voters a preview of the freshness that is an antidote to BN's air of staleness.

PKR, in particular, would stand to gain, because it has already made known that its slate for the election would comprise a high percentage of young candidates.

Given that some ignominy clings to the party over the defections it suffered from its coterie of elected legislators, an advance announcement of even a partial list of candidates, especially the younger nominees, would confer no small advantage to PKR without any perceptible risk that would stem from the move.

In the pre-election game of one-upmanship, this would be a gain of no mean significance.