

New GE13 issue: Who's to pilot BN
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COMMENT For a sense of the state of Umno's electoral prospects, consider how the question of what is a good time for Prime Minister Najib Razak to call for polls being steadily overtaken by a more distressing call.

This is whether or not he is indeed the leader under whose baton the dominant party of the BN can best fight the 13th general election.

The latter question bobs up on the back of speculation about what other damaging revelations will be uncorked by the ongoing inquiry in France into corrupt practices surrounding Malaysia's purchase of submarines from that country in 2003.

military malaysia navy french built submarine scorpene classThe latest disclosure about then defence minister Najib having allegedly asked a French arms broker for a payment of RM1 billion to a proxy company for the privilege of commencing procurement negotiations with his ministry may not be the only damaging morsel to come out of the ongoing inquiry in France into corrupt practices surrounding the whole affair; there may be more career-ending revelatory shards to come.

If indeed Najib's liberalisation measures had been more substance than shimmer; if the national cattle-breeding project had not turned out to be a festering embarrassment; and if Bersih 3.0 is not presently transiting from public relations disaster into festering sore, then the present judicial inquest in France with its potential to come up with subpoenas and arrest warrants directed at responsible Malaysian individuals would not be a matter over which Najib would lose sleep.

However, with a contagion of controversies swirling over the Najib administration, the question of when to time the polls - what with the clock on its necessity winding down fast - is now being overtaken by the issue of whether he is the least damage-prone pilot to bring the BN ship, via GE13, safely to port.

Liberalising drive

From April last year, PM Najib was been mulling the question of a propitious time in which to call an election.

It was believed he considered holding it simultaneously with the Sarawak state election in April 2011, but then thought it better wait it out and see how Abdul Taib Mahmud fared for a better sense of what more he needed to do before asking the national electorate for the endorsement a new PM is traditionally in need of.

NONThe Taib government in Kuching obtained a wobbly endorsement, sufficient to give the PM some idea of what more he needed to do before he could safely seek his own specific mandate.

Then Bersih 2.0 was staged on July 9. The demonstration by the polls reform advocacy group upset the PM's calculations.

The size of the crowds in support of electoral reform, its racial diversity and its generational variety forced the PM to defer calling for polls on the grounds he needed to do more than he had initially been willing to in order to face the verdict of the national electorate.

From last September, as a response to the signals emitted by outsize Bersih crowds, Najib commenced a liberalising drive, coupling attempted reform of repressive laws with cash handouts to the hard pressed.

Opinion surveys reported that the handouts had created a feel-good glow felt by the have-nots for the PM, but when the promised liberal reforms that his administration rammed through Parliament appeared to be more glister than gold, public sentiment began to run against Najib.

The PM had by then been stumping for votes on a platform of personal appeal. He as a new broom PM would sweep better than the much soiled party and coalition he leads, he was purportedly telling voters.

Sliver of chance

With his liberal agenda of reform shorn of credibility, the PM had a sliver of a chance to rescue matters by the way he handled Bersih's threat to call out the crowds once again in a third demonstration in four and half years in support of a hot-button issue: polls reform.

NONEHis administration feinted in the direction of allowing the demonstration before retracting its liberal-seeming leanings by first demarcating boundaries and, when these were apparently breached, responding with disproportionate force.

If the casualties from that reaction were confined to only participants in the Bersih protest, matters would not be that bad.

Instead, a reactionary police force added battered journalists to the spiraling list of denizens who feel that the government is trapped in terminal decay.

Now the rot is so pervasive it prompts the question that even this late, a new pilot for the wobbly ruling coalition could plausibly pull a draw (a hung Parliament?) from the jaws defeat in GE13.

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