

GE13: Time is fast running out for Najib

MalaysiaKini.com

June 28, 2012

By Nigel Aw

ANALYSIS If the old adage that one week in politics is a long time is anything to go by, then one election cycle may be seen as an eternity.

As Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak races against time to restore BN to its former glory, eternity is a luxury he does not have.

With less than a year left before the 13th general election deadline, speculations of a snap election have repeatedly fizzled out despite the prime minister's continuous hints of such a move.

The closest signal yet was when Najib visited a Felda settlement in Pahang on May 8, where he cheekily said of the warm reception: "If this is the kind of support that we are getting, then I think we can dissolve Parliament tomorrow."

That was more than two weeks after MPs rushed to pass close to two dozen bills in Parliament, including Najib's political reforms - an arduous task that required Parliament's clock to be frozen in a move not seen in 22 years.

But like speculations many times before, the dissolution of Parliament did not materialise, indicating that Najib is still not confident enough to get the mandate from the people.

Though detractors would like to believe that this was because the prime minister has had a difficult time in office, Najib has in fact restored some stability with BN as chief of the ruling coalition.

Taking power on April 3, 2009 from his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who was pressured to leave after leading the BN to its worst electoral performance in 36 years, Najib inherited a coalition that was in shambles.

But three years later, MCA chieftains have ended their open civil war while the former MIC strongman S Samy Vellu was finally convinced to hand over power to a successor.

Umno warlords too have coalesced around Najib's leadership and - at least for now - they do not appear ready to make a move to unseat him as they did to his predecessor.

Despite the stronger position of the BN machinery today, the spectre of Abdullah's political demise for failing to retain the two-thirds majority in Parliament in the 2008 general election is a cause for Najib's concern.

Najib's middle class dilemma

Mindful that the elusive super-majority hinges on a largely progressive-minded middle class, Najib on the eve of Malaysia Day last year announced a slew of political reforms, including the abolition of the colonial-inherited Internal Security Act.

But having to juggle the reforms with push-backs from ultra-conservatives within Umno - who are finding it difficult to adopt to progressive ideas after decades of ethno-nationalism - the middle class and professionals have dismissed the changes as half-hearted.

Instead, many responded by turning out in force for the Bersih 3.0 protest which, aimed at electoral reform, attracted various dissenting groups upset with the government. Organisers claimed the April 28 rally attracted up to 250,000 people, the largest since the Reformasi protests of 1999.

Caught between rivals bidding their time against Najib if he is not able to revive BN's electoral fortunes and an adamant middle class hungry for genuine reforms, the prime minister has sought to buy more time to ensure stronger electoral support.

Putting part of his fiscal economic reforms that would require unpopular moves such as subsidy cuts and the introduction of the goods and services tax on the back burner, Najib has embarked on a campaign to dangle carrots to the more malleable groups in a bid to cover ailing support from the middle class.

Since early this year, Najib has made appearances at gatherings of targeted groups, such as Felda settlers, petty traders and taxi drivers, showering them with goodies.

At such gatherings, Felda settlers' households were given RM15,000 each, while taxi drivers drove off with RM520 in tyre vouchers and petty traders received large discounts for their licence renewal.

This was on top of BN's 'Janji Ditetapi' (Promises Kept) campaign across the country to remind people about the various populist policies and disbursements under the banner of 1Malaysia.

Najib boasted during his gathering with the cabbies last Sunday that the Taxi Rakyat 1Malaysia (TR1Ma) voucher was an "addition to the long list of 1Malaysia brands", including Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M), the two KR1Ms - Klinik Rakyat 1Malaysia and Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia - and a slew of other "products" under a slogan that has turned into a brand name.

With time and money, the prime minister hopes that if he cannot lead BN to regain the much sought two-thirds majority, then he can at least out-perform his predecessor's 140-seat victory in the 222-seat Parliament that will ultimately decide his political fate in Umno as well.

This is on top of his ambition to regain Selangor, one of the wealthiest states in the country that has traditionally been a source of patronage for the Umno grassroots.

However, time does not appear to be on Najib's side as Parliament will automatically dissolve, going by the federal constitution, when it reaches its full five-year term by April 29 next year,

forcing fresh elections within 60 days.

'Perfect weather' may turn to storm

While waiting will allow Najib more time to woo voters from more groups, it may prove to be a double-edged sword as it can also undo the inroads made in other areas.

Soon after coming to power, Najib announced a slew of liberalisation exercises for the economic sector, which invited cautious optimism from the business community.

But with the uncertainty of a snap general election looming continuously, even the optimists within the business community grew impatient, with Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers president Yong Poh Kon urging Najib to get on with the election as the uncertainty is hurting businesses.

Even Najib's National Key Results Areas (NKRA), which initially received much attention, albeit with some scepticism from the opposition, have begun to lose their sparkle.

One example is the government's insistence that crime, one of the country's NKRA's, has dropped despite a surge in violent crimes reported in recent months.

The insistence of technocrats in bandying numbers has proven confusing. Not empathising with the citizens on their growing fears and not focusing on doubling efforts to curb crimes has not helped Najib's administration.

As Najib criss-crosses the nation, lending star power from his fairly high approval ratings to BN, the question that begs to be answered is whether he can gain more new ground than he loses by waiting for the "right time" to call the election.

His star power may not necessarily translate into votes, as seen from a Merdeka Centre report that shows the BN government achieving a much lower approval rating than Najib himself.

However, the greatest risk Najib could face if he continues to wait for the right time to call the general election would be the little room he would have left for damage control should a new scandal plague the BN.

This was the case with the National Feedlot Corporation scandal, which dragged on for four months.

Fortunately for the BN, that issue has been mitigated - though it remains a potent topic for the opposition - after government took measures by charging NFC chairperson Mohamad Salleh Ismail with criminal breach of trust.

While pundits continue to move their predicted general election dates to later this year, while some suggest it could even be early next year, Najib may prove them wrong by going for it soon - or the 'perfect weather' he is waiting for could well be a 'perfect storm'.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/202103>