

Najib turning a downslide into disaster

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These days Prime Minister Najib Razak must be looking back to April 2011 when he hesitated to go simultaneously to the polls with Sarawak Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud the same way former International Monetary Fund chief Dominic Strauss-Kahn must look at his visit to the Sofitel Hotel in New York last year.

Najib's hesitation tripped him into a concatenation in which every divination of when it would be a good time for him to seek a national mandate was subverted by unfavourable circumstances.

It is moot whether Strauss-Kahn's weakness for philandering would not have had him exposed nevertheless, had he not stayed at the Sofitel where he was reported to have had a sensational dalliance with a chambermaid that destroyed his chances of being the Socialist Party's candidate for president of France - he had been the odds-on favourite for the nomination.

In the event, the stolid Francois Hollande became the Socialist Party nominee and eventual winner of the presidential contest against incumbent Nicholas Sarkozy, presumably leaving Strauss-Kahn with the unenviable option of wringing his hands - or rather tightening his knickers - when musing on the what-could-have-been.

It is doubtful Najib is the ruminative sort. If he were, the departure last weekend of two Sabahan members of parliament from the BN fold ought to be viewed as yet another downdraft in a spiral that is well nigh irreversible.

Given the unbroken series of scandals that have dogged the government since the time Najib allowed Taib Mahmud to go to the ballot in Sarawak in April last year, unaccompanied by simultaneous polls in the rest of the country, the question of when is it a good time for the PM to call an election that would give him the mandate to rule in his own right has become a painfully stupefying one.

Pak Lah too was highly popular

A host of scandals have occurred on Najib's prime ministerial watch since April 2011.

Worse, the huge demonstrations organised by polls reform advocacy group, Bersih, in July 2011 and last April in Kuala Lumpur have combined to create the impression that Najib's government is in deep recession where popular support is concerned.

True, a supposedly independent opinion survey continues to find that the PM enjoys high personal ratings among voters.

But ever since his predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was rated by an opinion poll just before the March 2008 general election as comparably highly placed in the public's

esteem, which then did not save him from stumbling to staggering - and office-stripping - losses in the eventual ballot, these surveys are regarded with skepticism.

Now with two BN MPs from Sabah having crossed over to the independent benches, and despite cynicism about their real motives, the effect of their departures does very little to sustain belief that the confidence-building measures the Najib administration has undertaken ever since taking office three years ago presage a reversal of the electoral fortunes inflicted on the Abdullah government.

But hope must be springing eternal in its breasts, as witness its continuing munificence towards civil servants and Felda settlers, an extravagance that could scarcely be justified given the state of our national debt which is perilously close, if not already in breach of, the legal ceiling of 55% of GDP.

Long-sitting governments in danger of electoral repudiation are apt to resort to reckless nostrums in the hope of extending tenure.

Spending its way to victory

With the Najib administration's tendency to throw money at places in its fort when cleavages have appeared, do expect that there will be more goodies doled out to its flanks in Borneo after the ructions that saw the departure of two MPs from Sabah BN.

This is a government that will not hesitate to open its increasingly depleted purse to beguile a problem from accruing into a crisis.

Incidentally, this is the centenary of the birth of a world renowned economist, Milton Friedman, whose ideas have great pertinence to not only the current issues in the West but also to political questions in our country.

In his writings, the Nobel laureate flatly opposed actions that would cause inflation. He also frowned on 'easy money', which in the understanding of his profession was about deficit spending.

Friedman always maintained that the Great Depression of the 1930s was the result of government policy, not market failure. That led to counsel state, institutions and individuals to keep their fiscal house in order.

Of course, Friedman's writings were more than about economics; they were about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Reading him, one would argue that a debt-strapped government that sought to maintain its popularity by inflationary spending would convert a downturn into a disaster.