

PM taking serious polls risk, says analyst

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By Nigel Aw

While many have lauded the wide scope Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has given the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) to investigate the illegal immigrants problem in Sabah, this may be serious risk for the ruling coalition in a state crucial to determining its continued hold on Putrajaya.

Sabah-based political analyst Arnold Puyok said the six-month period given to the RCI to investigate the matter would mean the outcome of the probe would fall very close to the general election date, which must be called by April 28.

Arnold said the people of Sabah would only be satisfied if the RCI is completed before Parliament is dissolved for the next general election.

"The findings of the RCI may work for or against the BN... what happens if it is not in favour of BN? Many Sabah Umno leaders may be implicated in the issue," the UiTM lecturer said.

However, he added, Najib may not have had a choice following the recent defections by two Sabah BN MPs and his move might therefore have been necessary to quell further instability in the state.

"Everyone in Sabah wants an RCI, especially the Kadazan-Dusun-based parties that have been putting pressure on Najib because the illegal immigrant issue is important to them," Arnold said.

But whether the move would quell the discontent in Sabah, Arnold said, was yet to be seen.

Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, who had presided over the defection of Tuaran MP Wilfred Bumburing and Beaufort MP Lajim Ukin on July 29, will be back in Sabah tomorrow. He has claimed another BN representative would defect.

However, Arnold said Najib's decision - which came in defiance of former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad - was a bold step, especially since the RCI has very comprehensive terms of reference.

Announcing the scope of the RCI after meeting with Sabah BN leaders this afternoon, Najib had said the commission would look into, among others, the possibility of unlawful citizenship given to immigrants and whether such persons have got into the electoral roll.

Arnold said the mere six months allocated to the commission would mean it would have to work "fast and under pressure" to investigate the decades-long issue.

'Scope's good, but track record isn't'

Similarly satisfied with the terms of reference is Sabah PKR security, immigration and electoral reform bureau chief Chong Eng Leong.

"It's sufficient, as long as they are sincere, especially in finding out the number of blue identity cards given not according to law and how they got into the electoral roll with the view to expunge them," he said.

However, Chong remains wary of the RCI as recommendations from several such commissions in the past have fallen on deaf ears, with no action taken.

"The RCI can recommend all it wants. Just look at the RCI on Teoh Beng Hock and the one on improving the police force... how many of the recommendations were actually taken up?" he said.

In 1999, Chong successfully filed an election petition in the Kota Kinabalu High Court. The court declared the Likas state election null and void as a result of dubious names in the state's electoral roll.

Following this, Mahathir, who was premier then, moved to amend the constitution to prevent the electoral roll from being reviewed by the judiciary.

Under Sabah immigration laws, Chong said, even Malaysian citizens who enter Sabah through proper channels could be denied entry. So, what more about people who were given citizenship illegally?

"So, if the government insists on keeping these 'instant citizens', then it can send them over to the peninsula," he said.

Chong claimed that National Registration Department (NRD) officers had drafted statutory declarations for illegal immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s to declare themselves as citizens in a systematic process to grant them citizenship on grounds they voted or the BN.

He claimed that to date, only 1.6 million citizens are genuine Sabahans while one third of the state's citizens gained their status under the citizenship-for-votes scheme dubbed 'Project IC' or 'Project M' (M for Mahathir). This was on top of one to two million foreigners in the country.

"All this came at the expense of genuine Sabahans, in terms of healthcare, hawker business and work opportunities," he said.

Mahathir has been accused of engineering an illegal but systematic granting of citizenship to immigrants during his tenure in order to alter the state's racial and religious demography, so as to cement political support for the BN, a claim that he vehemently denies.

'Why no national probe?'

In an immediate reaction to Najib's announcement, DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang was less kind. He described the RCI as "too little, too late and with too limited powers".

Lim pointed out that the BN had in 2008 rejected a similar parliamentary motion for the RCI on the Sabah illegal immigrant problem.

Stating that the long-delayed RCI was facing an "ocean of public scepticism", Lim said he doubted the sincerity of forming the RCI to solve a four-decade long problem.

"Can the RCI probe into Project M and call up Mahathir as a star witness? Can RCI probe those responsible for massive issue of false documents?" he said in a statement today.

Lim added that this modus operandi was no longer limited to Sabah and that it should extended nationally.

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