

## **Najib agonising over GE date and strategies**

**MalaysiaKini.com**

**4 Disember, 2012**

**Oleh Galvin Wong**

It is now almost three years since Najib Abdul Razak took over from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as prime minister.

He has performed a slew of legislative reforms, set out major economic and education plans but has not yet taken the step to call for Malaysia's 13th general election.

Following the timeframe the constitution sets out, Najib has the autonomy to call elections before April 21, after which the Elections Commission has the prerogative and must call elections within 60 days.

With time running out and only a few windows of opportunity left, when will he take that step? And what are his plans and strategies in the few months of the run-up to this election?

Najib's electoral plan - what we can expect

Najib and BN's popularity was at its highest since he took over early this year with a Merdeka Centre survey in February showing that 69 percent and 49 percent of Malaysians respectively were satisfied with their performance.

It is very likely that he would have called elections in April or May if it had not been for Bersih 3.0.

The high turnout displaying the people's discontent over clean and fair elections as well as allegations of police brutality resulted in his delaying of elections and since then his popularity has not recovered, with recent survey results a far cry from the figures early this year.

The build-up that resulted in his good showing among the rakyat early this year had two distinctive features.

The first was a strong economy and financial incentives in the budget and the second was a large number of legislative reforms.

A strong economy and good standard of living are the biggest factors that determine how Malaysians vote, and Najib fared very well by this criteria.

2011 was an excellent year as Malaysia came off the back of a strong economy and also a goodie filled budget laced with handouts and popular programs.

Furthermore, calls that had gone on for far too long for the abolishing and amendments of restrictive laws by civil society were finally heeded as Najib abolished draconian laws such as the ISA and amended acts like the PPPA.

This combination of strategic thrusts set Najib in an excellent position for elections.

In the run-up to the next election, we have and will continue to see similar actions by Najib, albeit with additional attention being paid to two other major factors that have popped up in the past year - cleaner elections and East Malaysia.

Like the previous year, 2012 has also been an excellent year for the economy. When the government first announced the 2012 GDP growth target of 5 percent, it was met with scepticism from research houses and the opposition alike.

However, the country has performed above expectations in the last two quarters, and we look on par to achieving the target.

Likewise, the 2013 budget is similarly laced with goodies. BR1M has been expanded to benefit almost 67 percent of Malaysians according to the World Bank. Popular programs such as KR1M and Klinik 1Malaysia have been retained.

Also, the government reduced the 2013 budget deficit to 4 percent and also announced that it would fall to 3 percent by 2015.

We will also see the implementation of the minimum wage starting Jan 1, 2013 which will be a boost to voters especially those in Sabah and Sarawak, whose mean wages are well below the RM800 minimum wage. Inflation, quite the problem pre-2008 has fallen from 2.7 percent in Q1 to 1.4 percent in Q3 2012.

One popular plan that achieved resounding successes in Malaysia's social and economic arena as well as created thousands of jobs is the ETP/GTP.

With strong recent showings in the recent November update, Najib will want to take the opportunity to further trump its achievements through the ETP/GTP Annual Report that will likely be announced before the elections.

We will not see many legislative reforms this time around. Najib has pushed far enough to pass the reforms he did early this year and it is likely that conservative elements within Umno will not let him go any further.

However, in July he announced the government's plan to replace the Sedition Act with the National Harmony Act. De facto law minister Nazri Aziz has stated that it will be done in 2013 and this is probably what we may see come next year.

Clean and fair elections have risen to the forefront of Malaysian politics in the past few years. The increased turnouts since Bersih 1.0 in 2007 is proof of the growing support for

this issue.

As such, the EC has finally given in to the demand of the people to clean the electoral roll and allow overseas Malaysians to vote. We will likely see progress updates on these reforms over the next two to three months.

These two reforms will certainly quell discontent. These moves are also strategic as they will pacify the hugely influential Bersih organization and reduce possibility of a Bersih 4.0. We will discuss this possibility later on in this article.

Finally, Najib's long awaited announcement of the royal commission of inquiry (RCI) in August brought much relief to East Malaysians. This issue has been considered as the most important electoral issue to many Sabahans and Sarawakians and the move to solve it bodes well for Najib.

In the recent months, the stakes have been raised with the defection of two BN leaders and the frequent campaign stops by main opposition leaders especially Anwar Ibrahim.

If the results of the RCI are not announced before GE13, his calling of an RCI may seem insincere and may be construed as him merely wanting to temporarily satisfy voters without seriously tackling the issue.

As such, there is the real possibility we might see the results of the RCI early next year, with Najib promising a solution if BN retains power in after GE13.

#### March-April elections

Najib has two remaining windows for elections. The first is from now (early December) till early February followed by a brief interlude because of Chinese New Year celebrations. The second window will be mid-February to late April.

Many have speculated that elections will be in December or January now that the Umno general assembly is over and the grassroots are energised. I would disagree for three reasons.

Firstly, the combination of scandals some emerging (Deepak) and some ongoing (AES, Nazri Aziz and Musa Aman RM40 million political donation) are fresh on people's minds and will definitely have an impact if elections are held within these two months.

Scandals like the Deepak revelations are also likely to gain further traction very soon.

Secondly, a fresh round of protests such as Himpunan Hijau's Green Walk and Dong Zong education gathering has raised to people's minds the issues that have not been dealt with by the government.

Although not as large as Bersih 3.0, they are still a cause of worry. Najib will likely want the

impact of protests and scandals to leave public consciousness as much as possible before calling elections.

Finally, the expected reforms I have stated above will likely be done and progress updates given gradually throughout these two months.

BR1M will be handed out beginning in January, the ETP/GTP Annual Report was handed out early April this year but we might see it being released earlier next year.

Allowing overseas Malaysians to vote and abolishing the Sedition Act requires legislative amendments and we might see one last short parliamentary session in January to push for these reforms.

Thus, we are looking at the second window after CNY holidays for elections.

Possible game changers

As elections loom over us, what can throw Najib off his track and result in him delaying or possibly bringing forward the elections?

Firstly, another rally for clean and fair elections would definitely be a major setback.

Although the EC has announced proposed reforms, it is still unclear how far they would go and even if they are sincere, how well they would perform especially in cleaning up the electoral roll.

For example, even in the use of indelible ink, the EC has failed to satisfy Bersih's stringent standards.

There would likely be progress updates on EC's actions in the next two months. But would the electoral roll be able to withstand Bersih's scrutiny?

If it does not, a Bersih 4.0 would be ideal in creating intense public pressure on the EC and Najib as a huge turnout will be expected with elections closer than ever.

Najib will have no choice but to act as he cannot wait it out as he did in the previous two Bersih rallies.

Secondly, a huge scandal like the NFC scandal might also result in a possible delay to wait out its impact or possibly elections brought forward in order to stymie the scandal from developing.

The non-existent coverage by mainstream media has also helped recent scandals from having the impact NFC or Altantuya had and because this tactic will continue to be employed, we will be unlikely to see any mega scandals.

That said, would Najib risk waiting out his tenure and allowing the EC to take over his autonomy to call the elections? Yes he would.

After all, with numerous allegations against EC's independence with one even showing that both the EC's number one and two were former Umno members, it is possible that EC's autonomy is still Najib's autonomy.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd

Source: <http://www.malysiakini.com/news/215885>