

PM's polls-delaying gambit becomes a joke

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COMMENT Steadily and surely, the options have whittled down to naught for the Najib Abdul Razak administration.

Five years have lapsed since the last general election and almost four full years have passed on Najib's prime ministerial watch alone.

But Najib had not seen it fit, before it is constitutionally mandated, to call for polls.

Newly installed Malaysian prime ministers have not waited this long to seek a national mandate.

Najib's father, Abdul Razak Hussein, waited four years from taking over from predecessor Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1970 before calling for a general election in August 1974. But there were extenuating circumstances and so the delay was justifiable.

Razak (centre in photo) had officially taken over more than a year on from the race riots of May 1969 that exploded days after independent Malaysia's third general election.

Those were times of political turbulence and the gestation of a new post-May 13 political order was not something that could be foreshortened before electoral endorsement of it was sought.

Since Razak, a newly-installed PM has not waited an interminable length of time such as Najib has.

Hussein Onn, who took over as PM when Razak died rather suddenly in January 1976, waited something like 31 months to call a general election in August 1978, a long time indeed but not as yawningly long as Najib has tarried.

Hussein was induced to leave legal practice by Razak to join the government in the fraught days after May 13, 1969.

He was a reluctant politician and a stop-gap deputy prime minister as a result of the death of the reliable and formidable Dr Abdul Rahman Ismail in August 1973.

Waiting 31 months before newbie PM Hussein sought his own mandate was not, in the circumstances, an impugnably long time for him to seek his mandate.

47 months since Najib took over

Since Hussein, newly installed PMs, Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi,

took nine and four months respectively before they sought and obtained their own mandates.

So Najib's wait of a now 47-months since taking over as PM - a length of time that winds down the incumbent's term to its constitutionally mandated limit - is extraordinary by any means, redolent more of fear than confidence at what the ballot might bring.

Najib has a pat explanation for the delay: he is said to want all aspects of his transformation programme to be implemented before he goes to the polls.

Just now there is mordant irony to the transformation that the PM speaks of.

Wags are apt to remark that the only transformation they have seen in recent times is the rather startling transformation of the band of intruders at Lahad Datu who arrived on Feb 9, from an innocuous-seeming ragtag bunch, albeit touting M16s and grenade launchers, to "terrorists" that have to be arrested or exterminated, in Defence Minister Zahid Hamidi's telling.

There can be no blinking the matter now.

The prime minister's gamble in deferring GE13 has turned out to a comprehensive dud: he has lost much more by delaying the polls than he possibly could have gained.

Had he gone to the polls, as he may have wanted to simultaneously with the Sarawak state election 22 months ago, he could well have pulled off a victory with room to spare.

The excruciatingly embarrassing National Feedlot Corporation scandal, Deepak Jaikishen's damaging revelations, and now the 'dead in the water' sodomy case against nemesis Anwar Ibrahim where the father of accuser Saiful Bukhari has revealed that matter was an "evil conspiracy" whose trail of responsibility allegedly leads to the PM's office - were all matters that had not yet come to light.

The PM's dithering attributable to either a spiraling scandal or a swelling protest march induced in him a polls-deferment psychosis.

Two botched approaches

But deferment did not bring, as Najib obviously hoped, enhancement or retrieval of BN's slumping prospects, either on the coattails of government goodies to the rakyat or on the strength of liberalising policies purporting to reflect an administration transformed from the sleepwalking of the Abdullah years.

In addition, there was the matter of his government's two botched approaches to the show of people's power by polls reform pressure group Bersih in July 2011 and April 2012 - demonstrations that turned out to be indicative barometers of mounting public sentiment against the powers-that-be.

When finally Najib's administration got things right as reaction towards public displays of discontent - as was the case with regard to the People's Uprising Rally on Jan 12 - the turnout for the opposition-organised demonstration was so large that it did not matter anymore that the government had things, finally, right with respect to public demos.

Lessons tardily learned, like justice too long delayed, are as useless as buried treasure.

It became apparent that to the Najib administration, polls deferment was a narcotic to dull the pain of realisation that no matter what it did to tidy up its act or to dole out the goods, ongoing exposures of scandals and the success of the Pakatan Rakyat-controlled state governments of Penang and Selangor had combined to call time on continued Umno-BN rule.

The drip-drip-drip of scandal was like acid, corroding public belief in the ability of a new broom PM to transform government after decades that had seen its bad ways become entrenched and ossified.

In the final few weeks of its term, the botched handling of an intrusion by a foreign armed band in Sabah, resulting in eight Malaysian lives lost thus far, combined with dramatic disclosures in the sodomy case against Anwar to render the Najib administration a joke as gruesome as the mutilation inflicted on six of the our dead in Semporna.

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