

Signs of poll dates are a changing
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COMMENT Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a shift in the speculated timing of the general election.

After Barisan Nasional's win in the Hulu Selangor by-election in late April, coming as it did after their victory last October in the Bagan Pinang poll, speculation was rife that a much earlier-than-its-due-date general election would be held in the period April-June next year.

Constitutionally, the nation's 13th General Election is not due until 2013.

But newly installed prime ministers are apt to ask for a fresh mandate within months of taking over. Najib Razak is expected to be no different.

sibu by election 120510 najib at hoover mission house PM Najib, who replaced Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in April last year, began his tenure with a raft of changes in economic policy affecting investment and equity ownership, all aimed at evening out the playing field.

Good vibes from these changes, confident rhetoric about an intended replacement of the NEP with a more egalitarian New Economic Model, and a trumpeted government transformation programme, all projected an image of a new broom wanting to sweep clean.

The win in Hulu Selangor accentuated the feeling that the Najib administration augurs a new era; surely, it wasn't going to be vacant and vacillating like its predecessor.

But mid-May brought a setback by way of BN's defeat in the Sibul parliamentary by-election.

Defeat in a hitherto BN bastion fortified evidence that the Chinese vote which fled the BN in the last general election and stayed with Pakatan Rakyat in the Hulu Selangor poll, was not a peninsula-only phenomenon.

The desertion wave had spread to Sibul, thus clouding BN's prospects in the next Sarawak state election, where the Chinese are the second largest bloc of voters. The state poll is due by July 2011.

A respectable showing by Pakatan in the state election would ramify badly for the BN across Sabah and affect for the worse Najib's bid to recover lost electoral ground on the peninsula.

Retreat on the NEM

Worse, the Sibul setback intensified the forces of reaction in Malay political circles to economic and political changes that Najib was shaping to make.

The reactionary forces coalesced around Perkasa, led by stormy petrel Ibrahim Ali and encouraged by former PM, Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Their pressure compelled Najib to retreat on the NEM, which is essentially an imitation of Anwar Ibrahim's Malaysian Economic Agenda.

NONEThe NEM was supposed to be the icing on the cake of the 10th Malaysia Plan, unveiled by Najib in mid-June. The fanfare over its unveiling was dimmed by his retreat on the NEM.

Meanwhile, the recurrent litany of mismanagement and corruption in government did not abate, the most recent episode concerning steep falls in Felde's cash situation resounding over the body politic like the cry of a wounded animal.

July's disclosure from Petronas, the country's cash geyser, of slumping profits only served to underscore an earlier warning by cabinet minister Idris Jala that rising government debt, if unchecked, bodes bankruptcy for the country.

Revenue from Petronas is a mainstay of the national budget.

Combined with the drip-like disclosures of the private investigator, P Balasubramiam, and the asymmetrical warfare waged from Manchester by Raja Petra Kamaruddin, the overall picture of a government slithering down the chute refuses to recede.

Meanwhile, the judicial inquest into Teoh Beng Hock's death winds its labyrinthine way to stalemate and Umno's fevered campaign to tie the noose of Jew-lover around opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's neck smacks of desperation at white heat.

Throw into this the reluctance of BN grandees Abdul Taib Mahmud, albeit quietly conveyed, and S Samy Vellu, publicly strutted, to retire, and you have an overall situation of galloping deterioration in the government of Najib Razak.

The nadir would be if on the basis of the evidence adduced thus far a guilty verdict is found against opposition leader Anwar Ibarhim in his sodomy trial scheduled to end in August.

The case looks like something concocted in the bowels of a Stalinist state.

The wooing of PAS

In sum, the conditions, rosy-hued in late April but cloudy thereafter, are not conducive to the calling of a general election. They are unlikely to change for the better in the near future.

Najib's announcement yesterday that Umno was willing to talk with PAS provided there are no pre-conditions attached is only the most recent and potent sign of a government whose strength is ebbing so badly that even the Election Commission chairman is prompted to say there is no need for polls next year when it is no business of his to hold forth on the matter.

Once this process of deterioration picks up speed, it's pretty much remorseless and defies cosmetic repairs such as cabinet reshuffles and policy shifts.

The question then becomes how long before it reaches the critical stage which in our case would be how long before the voter in the semi-rural and rural areas knows it.

Small wonder the Home Ministry in recent days has tried to shackle the party newsletters of PKR, PAS and DAP.

For PKR and PAS, the easiest way to reach the rural and semi-rural voter, whose access to the Internet is nonexistent or limited, is through their party organs.

Presently, the Home Ministry has relented by allowing Harakah to continue to publish but that is only because the PM is suing for talks with PAS.

Umno as supplicant is a sure sign a general election is not in the offing.

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