

BN's Early Elections Plan In Disarray
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During the last few months, Prime Minister Najib Razak has been pulling out one pre-election carrot after another from his inexhaustible supply of goodies aimed at persuading the electorate to vote BN's way in the coming general election (GE).

These range from indefinite postponement of the long delayed goods and services tax to financial grants and other handouts to Chinese, Tamil and Islamic religious schools as well as politically strategic groups including Felda settlers, Indian small entrepreneurs, low income communities, and imams and Kafa (religious) teachers.

Najib's backroom boys must have been supremely confident that this mass saturation of money and handouts – so effective in past elections - would pave the way for a resounding victory as they plotted the timing of the next GE.

Unexpected road blocks

Two recent developments appear to have now derailed the BN's plans for an early election to take advantage of the 'feel good' sentiments generated by the deluge of monetary incentives disbursed under the glare of fawning media coverage.

One is the spreading cloud of corruption and political irresponsibility associated with the National Feedlot Corporation's (NFC) scandal-ridden project.

This is not only likely to result in Minister Sharizat Jalil's resignation very soon but is also causing consternation and reverberations among Umno's grassroots members and supporters in the Malay heartland. The arrogance and contempt displayed by Shahrizat, who received loud applause from Wanita Umno delegates for her bellicose speech, will not be easily forgotten.

If the elections are called during the next several months when the cattle-gate case reaches its expected climax, Malaysians going to the polling booths will not only have indelible ink on their fingers; they will also go in with the overpowering and indelible stench of the NFC fiasco influencing their choice of parties.

The other development is one which the Prime Minister's think tanks and cronies high up in the civil service must be kicking themselves over. The introduction of a new improved salary scheme for the country's 1.4 million civil servants was to be the main 'game changer' in the 13th GE.

With a majority of the country's voters coming from civil servant or ex-civil servant households – perhaps 60% or more of the electorate – it is easy to understand why the roll-out of the new scheme was timed to take place just before the election. Its successful implementation would reinforce the BN's image as a government with the best interests of the civil service constituency at heart.

It is possible that if given the thumbs-up by the majority of civil servants, the new salary scheme could have affected the outcome in many marginal constituencies where the civil service vote is critical to tilt in favour of the BN candidates.

It is no exaggeration to say that civil service voters comprise the kingmakers in the country and that any aspiring government has to pay special attention to courting and winning this massive block of votes.

Devil in the SBPA details

The new public service remuneration scheme (SBPA) is to take effect in January 2012. The Public

Services Commission rushed its introduction without providing full details of the SBPA key components and without adequate consultation with stakeholders.

It was not surprising that the civil service trade union Cuepecs initially refused to be bulldozed into accepting what is now clearly emerging as “a half baked cake” with the icing of 7-13 percent salary increases prominently displayed but resting on a soggy base.

Among the scheme’s shortcomings is the lopsided salary increase that favours the top echelon.

One civil servant compared the impact of the new scheme on lower and higher rank staff. According to him:

“I am a civil servant at Grade E48, and reached my ceiling 5 years ago. Under the proposed new scheme (SBPA), I am told I will get 7 % increase. Overall, the quantum of increase is from 7-13 %. Now, the question I want to ask is: why do those in the Jusa [Jawatan Utama Sektor Awam] category get up to 100 % increase? They are already enjoying super-high salaries plus very generous allowances. Under the existing scheme, they are getting no less than RM13,000 (salary + allowances) and the move to increase their basic salary by 100 % (or even more in some of the Jusa grades) will mean their take-home pay + allowances will exceed RM20,000. And most of the time, these super-duper civil servants only act as ‘postmen’ in passing all the hard work and report-writing to their juniors. It is not fair at all. The Jusa people at PSD are rewarding themselves and throwing crumbs to the rest of the lower echelons of the civil service.”

Other concerns relate to the lack of consistency in grade improvement under the new scheme; lack of transparency in promotion exercises; and risks to civil service tenure arising from the implementation of KPIs.

In the latest development, the government has agreed to a two-week postponement in the implementation of the new scheme. Following the prime minister’s intervention, the Public Services Department and Cuepac met on Dec 23.

Cuepac president Omar Osman has since gone on record that all outstanding concerns involving SBPA have been resolved.

Earlier, according to Bernama, the Cuepac president had stated that some civil servants were unhappy with the upgrading and the salary increase because they claimed that the hike was too small. Omar was also reported to have queried: “The grade improvement under the SBPA scheme is not consistent. There are improvements in some grades but not in others. Why is there an increase for some but not for others?”

Further details of how the contentious issues have been resolved are still to be unveiled. It is surprising that the Cuepac leadership has been able – in the course of a single meeting – to resolve all concerns.

This, however, will not quell the resentment amongst the lower level staff on their small quantum of salary increment and the growing income inequalities between themselves and higher level officers. Such discontent is bound to simmer and may boil over during the coming GE.

Both Cowgate and the salaries issue are likely to send Najib’s political strategists back to the drawing board in terms of picking a date for the polls.

We can expect a barrage of political corrective actions to pacify the electorate, and a delay in the elections. With an increasingly sophisticated electorate that is cynical of political spin and dirty tricks, whether this delay will make any difference to the voting outcome is the burning question.

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