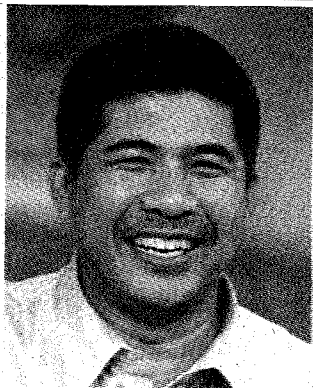
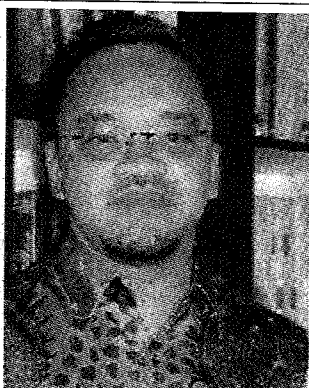




Khairy: A challenging general election ahead



Alwi: The PM really wants to win back Kelantan



Nasharudin: Crossed swords with the EC chairman

Awaiting inspiration

The Star - 13/1/2008

Everything seems to point to an early general election and many think the Prime Minister will find his 'inspiration' after the Chinese New Year festivities.

THE guessing game on the general election is almost over. The polls will be very, very soon, going by the statements coming from leading political figures, especially those in the ruling Barisan Nasional.

Most think the Prime Minister will find his "inspiration", the political catchword for deciding on an election date, after the Chinese New Year.

The bolder pundits declare it will take place in March, or more specifically, during the school holidays from March 8 to 15, because school premises are still the mainstay of the voting stations.

When asked several months ago where he was putting his money on the election date, Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad had said with an ironic smile that he would rather keep his money in his pocket.

It is probable that Radzi, much as he is loath to admit it, now has his money on polls in March.

The Chinese daily *Nanyang Siang Pau* had confidently predicted that elections would take place within 100 days of the end of 2007.

Even Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz who does not believe in talking politics has jumped into the fray.

She dared Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the de facto leader of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, to contest against her in Kuala Kangsar. The prospect of Anwar entering the lioness' den is quite tantalising but that is not going to happen because Anwar will only be able to contest the polls if it is held in April.

Actually, Elections Commission (EC) chairman Tan Sri Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman had claimed as early as last November that he knew the elections date but was not telling.

Engaging in speculation over the polls date is a year-long practice but Rashid was clearly out of line there and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi indicated as much when he said: "I am the Prime Minister, I know when it is time to advise the King to dissolve Parliament."

Rashid has also been engaged in a war of words with the opposition parties whose Bersih campaign to press for clean and fair polls has put the EC chairman under tremendous pressure.

Recently, he crossed into highly political territory when he told the opposition to boycott the elections if they did not agree with the system. His remarks so exasperated PAS deputy president Nasharudin Mat Isa

that the latter suggested Rashid resign his EC job and contest as a Barisan candidate.

"The Barisan is our main adversary but the EC is our chief hurdle," said Nasharudin.

Some say Rashid was only trying to be helpful; others think he rather likes the limelight. But he should have just stuck to his duties because most party bosses know what to do without him telling them to be prepared.

Most parties had completed their election training and dry runs by the middle of last year and the state party chiefs have even drawn up their preliminary lists of candidates.

Given that the last general election was on March 21, 2004, would a March election qualify as a snap poll?

"Any term more than three years is not a snap election. When you are well into the second half of the term, approaching four years and the conditions are there, then you are ready for polls," said Umno Youth deputy chief Khairy Jamaluddin.

Besides, not counting the stretch following the 1969 racial riots, only two elections - 1995 and 2004 - were called after a near five-year period. These were also periods where the ruling party and leadership were riding a popularity wave buoyed by political and economic sta-

bility.

But Abdullah will be approaching the 12th general election under a markedly different political climate from that in 2004.

The 2004 elections was a golden year for the Barisan. Back then, he was riding on the track record of his predecessor and the goodwill that he carried as the new Prime Minister.

This powerful wave carried him into a stunning victory that saw the Barisan toppling PAS in Terengganu and coming within a whisker of recovering Kelantan.

And if the last election was noted for its absence of critical issues, the coming one will be marked by a surplus of hot issues from man-in-the-street concerns such as rising costs of living and personal security to more national issues like the economy and religion.

"Every general election is challenging and has its own unique circumstances. Even the last one was challenging for the Barisan: we did not know what would happen in Terengganu and Kelantan. You only say it is easy in hindsight and that's why no political party takes anything for granted in an election," said Khairy.

Survey polls show that Abdullah's



Eye on elections: The Prime Minister is said to be quite ready to seek a fresh mandate from the people.

approval rating has stayed buoyant at 70% and more the last one year but he is also well aware of speculation of an opposition wind billowing through the more urban states like Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, parts of Perak and his own homestate of Penang.

There has been much discussion about the Chinese discontent that has grown over the last few years and which some have disputed as mainly a Chinese intelligentsia phenomenon.

This election will be a test of whether it is as widespread as some claim or largely a phenomenon within a limited stratum of Chinese society.

As such, urban areas where Chinese make up a significant proportion of voters will be a focus of interest and, of course, contests between traditional adversaries - MCA and Gerakan on one side and DAP and PKR on the other.

But the Prime Minister's advantage is that his own party has never been more intact.

Without any great issues rocking the Malay community, Malay votes tend to revert to their usual polarised division of Umno supporters sticking to Umno and likewise for PAS with both parties wooing the swing group in the centre.

This swing group will be intensely wooed, especially in Kelantan.

Kelantan will be Malay battleground to watch just as Penang will be the focus of the main Chinese battleground.

"The PM really wants to win back Kelantan and we really have better things to offer the people," said state Umno information chief Datuk Alwi Che Ahmad.

The Deputy Prime Minister, who spent last weekend in Kelantan, sent out a very political message to the Kelantan folk that the federal government wants to make the state a centre of Islamic distinction.

Said Alwi: "The DPM was here to inspect some projects and check on our election machinery. But looking at the reception he got, some of us thought that elections would be called the next day. I think people are ready to give us a chance."

Sabah is another interesting state to watch. Since Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitigan took PBS back into the Barisan, the state has not had a real opposition, so much so that people say that Chief Minister Datuk Musa Aman's main detractors are in his own party.

PKR is hoping to take advantage of the opposition vacuum and it remains to be seen whether an "imported opposition" will appeal to Sabahans.

Only parliamentary polls will be conducted in Sarawak, which had their state polls more than a year ago.

The Barisan will still hold on comfortably to power but it will not be possible to equal its golden victory of 2004 when it won 198 out of 219 parliamentary seats and 458 out of 505 state seats.



COMMENT
JOCELINE TAN

joceline@thestar.com.my