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Snap polls date sets tongue a-wagging

Umno's decision to postpone party elections by 18 months has fuelled speculation that the 13th general election may be around the corner. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak may well decide to capitalise on the positive mood now, writes ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR

MALAYSIA'S 13th general election is a much anticipated event. Never mind the official denials of a looming snap election, political parties and their supporters give the impression that they can hardly wait for the next polls.

When news that Umno, the anchor party of the ruling Barisan Nasional, had postponed its internal elections leaked before an official announcement was made late on Tuesday night, many were convinced that the time for the country to vote again was at hand.

The current tenure of elected representatives has only reached mid-term since the last general election on March 8, 2008. The next election is only due in May 2013.

Since elections have been held before the parliamentary term expires, usually when a booming economy is presumed to lift support for the government, the argument is that it could well work the same way this time around.

There are a number of speculation, including that of snap elections as early as the first quarter of next year, despite the cabinet having set March 7 for the next parliamentary session. March is the most popular bet, possibly since live of the 12 past general elections were held in that month.

Pundits are conveniently glossing over the fact that March 2012 or March 2013 are possible dates, too — going by their own deduction or logic. Some have suggested that the general election will be held together with the Sarawak state elections, an idea which Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud did not oppose.

"If the general election is called soon, then we will go with it," Taib reportedly said.

The Sarawak elections have to be held by July next year. A survey conducted by Sarawakpollster.com.my in September predicted that the Sarawak elections would be held in March; 62.5 per cent of respondents to its online poll thought so.

Its ongoing poll to gauge opinion on having the state



Umno president Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, announcing the postponement of party elections by 18 months on Tuesday.

elections simultaneously with the general election indicated that people were less keen on the idea although they were somewhat split when asked whether it would be advantageous to Sarawak BN parties.

Opposition pact Pakatan Bakyat is touting its "march to Putrajaya". Opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, struggling to keep his Parti Keadilan Bakyat from falling apart following bruising internal elections and to limit damage from infighting within Pakatan Bakyat components, was quick to challenge Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who is BN chairman and Umno president, to call for an early election.

Already, Anwar's leadership of Pakatan is at stake and some Pas leaders believe the party should be leading the group.

Some 11 million voters are expected to cast their votes in the next general election, a large chunk comprising young people whose interest in pol-

itics has risen since March 2008 and whose opinions will be shaped by the actions or inaction of political parties.

Although BN ceded control of five of 13 states and lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament to the opposition in 2008, the election results were defined by anti-BN votes, not purely pro-opposition votes.

Najib has since implemented reforms in government policies, all of which appear to be working positively as evidenced by strong wins in recent by-elections and a recovering economy, indicating a swing in support back to the BN.

Since the prime minister's popularity ratings, as measured by opinion polls, are on an upward trend and Pakatan Bakyat is showing signs that it has run out of steam, losing two parliamentary seats — Hulu Selangor and Galas — to BN, a window seems to have opened for an early election, if the prime minister so wishes.

Staying on to the full parliamentary term, however,

would provide time for the Najib administration to push through reforms and convince the people that BN is still the best for the country.

Najib is also due to begin a nationwide tour next month, focusing his visits on "grey areas" to woo lost support for the BN.

Analysts had said that the BN government needed more time to repair its image among non-Malays, tackle corruption and drive the economy higher with competitive policies.

April marked Najib's first anniversary as prime minister. His predecessor, 1st M Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, dissolved Parliament in March 2004, four months after taking over the premiership, while Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad dissolved Parliament in March 1982, eight months after becoming the fourth prime minister. Both scored landslide victories.

Najib had announced the postponement of the Umno elections at branch, division and national levels slated to be held next year by 18 months as provided by the party's constitution, to prevent the sort of competition that "could lead to clashes within the party".

His deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, while calling on Umno's 3.4 million members not to speculate on the election date, said the postponement of Umno elections was aimed at strengthening the party to avoid any negative impact that could arise from campaigning for posts, and not for the general election.

Opposition leaders like Pas deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa shared the opinion that the postponement of Umno elections was to prepare Umno members for the next general election.

For Datuk Ahmad Maslan, the Umno information chief, the extended period prior to the holding of party elections should be used by party divisions to work on strengthening Umno.

Predictions aside, the 13th general election will definitely arrive, if not next year, it will be the year after or in 2013 as stipulated by law.