

Early or late, GE13 a gamble for Najib
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By Debra Chong

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 14 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak is a cautious man who is caught between a crisis of confidence and trust.

Whether he chooses to call for national elections early or wait out the full term now depends on how well he convinces voters he has the will to change.

But with 18 months left to the Barisan Nasional's (BN) mandate and with the US and European markets crashing one after the other, Najib's options have narrowed to a six-month deadline that started last Friday immediately after the government's sugary Budget 2012 that is being financed heavily through borrowings.

Najib's options to call for a general election have narrowed to a six-month deadline that started last Friday. — File pic

"Let's face it the world economy is not going to pick up anytime soon. Why wait?" the Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS) director, Ng Yeen Seen, told The Malaysian Insider.

"Any strategic leader will call for elections within six months of the budget before the world economy gets worse," she said.

Economists predict that Malaysia may recover from the world economic fallout in two years at best; at worst, they think the gloomy global economy may hover for five more years, which will exceed the mandate expiry.

The Treasury, which is already strained by the government's promise to maintain its RM33 billion annual cost in subsidies, is unlikely to pull through in an emergency.

Political analysts said that time difference is the key factor that will decide if the ruling coalition can regain its two-thirds control of Parliament, lost for the first time in Election 2008, or see public support swing further in favour of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) pact.

"The prime minister is flying high now compared to after the Bersih 2.0 demonstration on July 9. He's got to show a vote for Najib is a vote for BN," said political scientist Sivamurugan Pandian.

The sixth prime minister scored close to 80 per cent public support when he entered office in April 2009.

His popularity plunged 20 percentage points in the days immediately after his government cracked down on civil society dissenters who took to the streets in calling for elections to be cleaner and more transparent.

Najib's Malaysia Day announcement for a bipartisan parliamentary panel to discuss electoral reforms has helped restore public trust to a certain degree.

But Mr Cautious' swift move to repeal outdated laws that allow detention without trial in

Parliament last week and which free up the media helped boost public confidence.

Born into the Pahang aristocracy, the son of Malaysia's second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein will be seeking his first mandate since taking over office from fifth prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"He's being tested. He'd not want to go down as the BN's last PM," Sivamurugan said of Najib.

But the USM don did not think Najib is in a position to call for polls until after March, when the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA) is due to be repealed in Parliament and its two replacement security laws that deal directly with terrorism and domestic racial and religious tensions are presented for approval.

"People want to see to see the outcome of the law reforms first, especially ISA, which is only going to be tabled in March. It's an opposition bullet so he has to handle it wisely," Sivamurugan said.

He echoed Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the country's longest-serving PM who is also seen to be Najib's sifu, to hold off calling elections until next year.

The still-influential Umno politician has twice warned Najib this year against holding the 13th general election this year, saying the BN lynchpin party was fragmented and internal sabotage will cost Najib to lose big in the ballot boxes.

"He needs to strengthen co-ordination among BN parties too," Sivamurugan said, referring to the squabbles that continue to plague the ruling coalition's 13 parties.

Leaders in the MCA, the BN's Chinese component and second-biggest party, have yet to close ranks and set aside their bitter rivalry despite their recent annual general meeting two weeks ago.

They have been practically written off as irrelevant by its ethnic community they were sworn to represent as more and more Chinese Malaysian businessmen are selling off their public-listed shares and moving their operations, or threaten to, outside the country.

But another political scientist, Mohammad Agus Yusoff, said Najib has little time to weigh his options and must call for elections in January or at the very latest by March next year to capitalise on his Budget 2012, which was designed to please the populace.

"But it's not good for the country and is not a solution to our economic problem. It's going to increase the government's deficit because the money is funded by borrowings. We can't depend so much on borrowings," he told The Malaysian Insider.

CPPS's Ng, who deals with public policies, shared the same view. She said Najib will be taking calculated risks in calling elections early but if he waits till full term, the vulnerable economic situation will become worse and a stronger civil society could emerge.

The Bersih 2.0 rally was led by a coalition of 62-registered civil societies who appear to have gained strength from the global support for their demands, especially from the critical western nations.

The lessons of July 9 seem to have spurred them further to realise their individual causes.

Most recently, the anti-Lynas grassroots group from Najib's home state, Pahang, has boosted its representation and delayed the operations of Australian rare earth miner in the coastal town of Gebeng.

"Najib is holding a double-edged sword whether he calls for elections early or waits out the full term," Ng said.

Mohammad Agus said if Najib chooses to call polls after March, the latter will lose the momentum from the budget and must start all over again.

The UKM professor in history, politics and strategy studies said: "It won't be an election budget anymore... The government is under siege. We badly need to restructure the economy."

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