

PM says polls panel won't affect timing of election
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 19 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak said today that general elections can be held “anytime” and will not depend on the proceedings of the parliamentary select committee on electoral improvements that will be formed in October.

But the prime minister also told reporters that despite the fact that such a panel will be dissolved along with Parliament before federal polls, whatever reforms that could be carried out before that would be executed first.

“Elections can be held anytime, there is no relation to the parliamentary select committee. Some things we can do immediately,” he said after chairing an Umno supreme council meeting today.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) chief had announced the panel — which he called a “sincere offer” today — on Monday in what was a major concession to electoral reform movement Bersih whose July 9 rally was met with stern police action before and during the rally, resulting in nearly 2,000 arrests in total.

But Dewan Rakyat Deputy Speaker Datuk Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar has said that the electoral panel would take a year to conclude discussions.

Najib, who must call a general election by early 2013, has delayed party polls that were due in April this year but Umno’s constitution requires that they can only be delayed by 18 months, which coincides with October next year — exactly when Wan Junaidi believes the committee will begin wrapping up.

With speculation that Najib will call snap elections soon, Wan Junaidi’s comments could mean that the parliamentary panel would not be able to present its findings as the Umno president would likely dissolve Parliament ahead of potentially fractious party polls.

Najib also brushed aside threats by Pakatan Rakyat (PR) to boycott the select committee if it was not satisfied with its terms of reference.

“This is a sincere offer on our part. We want to have discussions across the aisle to get consensus on improvements,” the prime minister said.

Tens of thousands took to the streets to support Bersih’s July 9 rally for clean and fair elections in defiance of warnings of police action.

Police dispersed demonstrators with tear gas and water cannon in chaotic scenes which finally resulted in nearly 1,700 arrests, scores injured and one ex-soldier dead.

The government crackdown led to international criticism and a group of Malaysians even organised a protest when Najib visited London in July, a rare experience for any Malaysian prime minister abroad.

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