

Ahead of polls, Najib's last card is the budget

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By Shannon Teoh



What is contained in Najib's briefcase at the next Budget session will have strong bearing on his political fortunes. — file pic

KUALA LUMPUR, July 27 — With less than two years left of Barisan Nasional's (BN) mandate, hopes of an opportune time for federal polls are slim for Datuk Seri Najib Razak as dissent grows and the economy remains sour.

Politicians from both sides of the divide told *The Malaysian Insider* that with a cash-strapped Treasury struggling to maintain subsidies in the face of surging inflation, the prime minister should announce an election budget at the end of the year and dissolve Parliament soon after.

Analysts also believe that while heightened racial rhetoric has recovered some Malay support for the ruling coalition, it is a zero-sum game that is delivering centrist voters to Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

"We should have a good budget first. Tun Abdullah Badawi didn't have such a budget and then called an election," said Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, referring to the former prime minister who was forced to step down a year after BN recorded its worst showing ever in Election 2008.

PKR deputy president Azmin Ali agreed, pointing out the economy was still lagging behind Putrajaya's six per cent growth target, only recording 4.6 per cent GDP growth in Q1 and is expected to remain under five per cent until June 2011.

"In two years, things can't get much better. But the question is with the government already short of funds, what can BN promise in its next budget?" the Gombak MP told *The Malaysian Insider*.

Political analyst Khoo Kay Peng went further, saying "things are going to get worse for Najib."

"There is no point waiting. The economy is going to be tougher in 2012 and meanwhile, no logical government will allow the likes of (Malay rights group) Perkasa and Utusan Malaysia to run rampant. It shows that Umno ultras are asking for a bigger slice of the pie. Najib is losing the middle ground," he said.

Pulai MP Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed said this was due to the ease with which issues could be politicised post-Election 2008.

"It doesn't matter what is the timing. Whenever it is, the opposition will just play up an issue for votes. Najib should just ensure the party machinery is ready because from now to 2013, nothing much is going to change," the Umno division chief said.

Najib, who succeeded Abdullah in April 2009, is said to require an improved performance in the next general election and anything short of reclaiming the ruling coalition's customary two-thirds of Parliament will put his hold on the prime minister's office at risk.

But inflation has hit pockets hard, with the consumer price index reaching a two-year high of three per cent in March and continuing to surge to 3.5 per cent last month after the Najib administration was forced to cut subsidies to fuel, electricity and sugar.

This has been coupled with an economy that has recorded four consecutive quarters of slowing growth, down to 4.6 per cent in the first quarter of the year as compared to 10.1 per cent in the same period for 2010.

Former MCA president Datuk Seri Ong Tee Keat said the prime minister still believes that his economic and government transformation packages will kick in by 2013 and turn the economy around.

"But it is true that with the global uncertainty, there is no crystal ball. Things could get better, but they could also get worse," the Pandan MP said.

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