

Pakatan to take advantage of any polls delay, says Anwar

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PETALING JAYA, Jan 7 — Datuk Seri Najib Razak's delay in calling elections will provide Pakatan Rakyat added time needed for last-minute campaigning, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has said.

The Malaysian Insider recently reported that Najib could reshuffle his Cabinet as early as this month and delay calling elections to later this year as scandals engulfing at least two ministers are threatening the feel-good factor of Budget 2012 where the prime minister dispensed direct cash aid to some 5.3 million households.

Anwar speaking at a ceramah in Subang Jaya on January 6, 2012. — Picture by Choo Choy May

It is understood the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) senior officials have a list of potential new ministers and deputy ministers who will be seen as Najib's people to execute his New Economic Model (NEM) and political transformation programme as he heads into the general election.

"He (Najib) has an option to defer it for a few months thinking that there will be no new scandals but I think that is to the contrary.

"It is an advantage to us if he defers a bit more," Anwar told The Malaysian Insider in a recent interview.

The PKR de facto leader said PR would utilise the extra time to launch an aggressive pre-polls ceramah campaign nationwide.

"We can go to the ground and explain the issues which are on a very high agenda among rural folks... National Feedlot Corporation (NFC) issue, zakat funds, issue of monopoly," he said, referring to scandals surrounding Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil and religious affairs minister Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom.

There has been speculation in the Chinese media and also among political analysts that Najib could dissolve Parliament after the Chinese New Year celebrations on January 23 for a March election, four years after Election 2008.

Umno won only 79 of the 112 federal seats it contested in 2008 when the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority and four more state governments. Former party president and Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stepped down a year after the losses and handed the leadership to Najib.

Party officials and analysts say the popular Najib must regain the two-thirds parliamentary majority or at least match Abdullah's victory margin.

Several Umno warlords have openly asked Shahrizat to resign from her political posts over investigations into her family's company, the (NFC), which the Auditor-General said was in a financial "mess" after getting RM250 million in public funds.

The Women, Family and Community Development minister has said the company has nothing to do with her and Najib and his deputy, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, have denied that she has sent a resignation letter. But a new probe by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has sparked speculation that Shahrizat will have to go rather than have the scandal smear Umno.

Umno is already on the backfoot after former Selangor Mentri Besar Dr Khir Toyo was convicted of graft and sentenced to a year's jail last month in a land purchase deal. He is appealing the case.

Jamil, the minister for Islamic affairs in the Prime Minister's Department, has denied he and two religious officials had misappropriated alms money to pay their legal fees in a case brought by opposition leader Anwar.

An audit report said RM63,650 from the council's zakat fund was used to settle their legal costs incurred when Anwar named the trio as respondents in his qazaf application. It also confirmed that the sum was repaid to the fund after the council obtained a RM70,000 grant in June last year as part of its general resources allocation from the government.

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