

Dr M: Early polls could break Umno
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JITRA, Oct 2 — Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today factionalism and internal sabotage continues to plague the ruling coalition's lynchpin, Umno, and warned that having national polls too soon may cost the party dearly.

This is the second time in recent months the former prime minister of 22 years has advised Barisan Nasional (BN) to hold off holding an early general election — previously predicted to take place during the November school holidays — by saying the time was not ripe.

The country's fourth PM told reporters in Kota Kinabalu on May 7 the government has plenty of time to carry out its plans and choose suitable candidates to field for the 13th general election, adding it could stretch this until 2012.

The current mandate expires only in 2013 but political parties have been in election mode since the Sarawak state poll last April.

"If the general election is held now, Umno may lose big because the support and spirit has faded," Dr Mahathir was reported as saying today by Bernama Online.

"Umno still has factions and the split is still critical. If there is awareness, a sense of gratitude and unity, BN can win," the state news agency quoted him further.

Still-influential at 86, the politician urged his Umno colleagues to return to the party's original fight to protect religion, race and country by casting aside self-interest to win the general election.

He advised Umno members to overcome their disappointment at not being picked for the general election, saying they still stood to gain in other ways.

BN lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority and four states, including wealthy Selangor and Penang, in Election 2008.

The result was blamed on splits within the dominant Malay-Muslim community over a perceived erosion of their rights to largesse, and widespread unhappiness from the ethnic Chinese and Indian groups over nearly half a century of racially-biased economic policies.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who took over as the country's sixth prime minister from Dr Mahathir's anointed successor, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has been pushing for economic, governmental and political reforms since taking office in April 2009.

However, the 58-year-old Umno president and BN chief has been forced to delay, if not call off, some of his ideas due to resistance from within his party and earned a reputation for backtracking on decisions.

A harsh police clampdown on electoral reforms movement Bersih 2.0 ahead of and during its July 9 rally has also tarnished Najib's image as a moderate Muslim leader in the eyes of global media.

Najib has been working hard to rebuild his public image and hired foreign experts in a bid to win back eroding public support.

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