

**Najib's cautious, methodical preparation seen delaying polls**  
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ANALYSIS, June 20 — When is the next general election? From last year to now, several dates have been cast as the “definitive” election date for Datuk Seri Najib Razak to get his personal mandate as prime minister, after he replaced Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in April 2009.

But as yet, the election date is as hazy as the smoke that blew across the Malay peninsula earlier this week, even as business groups and civil servants say an early election is preferable as it would end uncertainty and allow them to launch their plans at a time when the world economic outlook is gloomy.

An election must be called by next April 28, otherwise Parliament will be automatically dissolved and a general election held within 60 days.

Those familiar with Najib's thinking say he is cautious and meticulous about ensuring that his Barisan Nasional (BN) can win big and reclaim their two-third parliamentary majority that was lost in Election 2008.

Many have blamed Abdullah for the shock loss, especially the influential Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and Najib has been working hard to revive and regain support for the country's only ruling coalition since Merdeka, when it had been called the Alliance.

“Najib has said an election is war and one has to be prepared for war. That [the election is] not being called shows they are not as prepared as he wants them to be,” a BN strategist told The Malaysian Insider.

This includes catering to every demographic, especially first-time voters, whose support could help grow the 330,000-vote margin between BN and political foes Pakatan Rakyat in March 2008.

The strategist pointed out that while Najib remains popular with the public, receiving a 65 per cent approval rating in the last Merdeka Center poll, the government is not as popular — securing only a 48 per cent approval in a survey done after the Bersih rally on April 28. The results for Najib's Umno was not revealed but is said to be even lower.

Dr Mahathir had banked on BN's support when he grew personally unpopular. — File pic  
A BN leader recalled that even when Dr Mahathir grew unpopular for sacking Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, Umno and BN were well-accepted enough to carry the vote and form the federal government with a two-third majority, although the ruling coalition lost Terengganu.

“Najib is popular but he alone can't carry the party and its slate of new candidates. So he needs time; Umno needs time,” said the BN leader, who declined to be named.

He also pointed out that Abdullah had a 71 per cent approval rating going into Election 2008 but still lost the supermajority and four states.

“It will be a miracle that Najib, at 65 per cent popularity rating, can top Pak Lah and get

back the two-thirds," he said, calling Abdullah by his popular moniker.

Several polling dates

The BN leader also said the coalition was ready for polls this month or July, but the violent crackdown during the Bersih 3.0 rally on April 28 had dented BN's strengthening popularity.

"We had our chance but the police action blew it for Najib," he said.

Opposition officials also said they were prepared for a July election after BN rushed through 22 Bills in Parliament in April.

"As you can see, we only have four bills to debate now. Najib had July in mind but the numbers don't seem to be with him," a DAP official told The Malaysian Insider.

Najib can still call a July election by dissolving Parliament this week, but polling would need to be done by July 21, the expected start of the Ramadan fasting month, politicians said.

"It is not likely to happen in July because of Ramadan and also Putrajaya just gave RM1.5 million to each BN MP. We'll need time to spend it, soften the ground and get support," said one BN lawmaker.

He also expects more benefits and good news from the Budget 2013 due to be tabled on September 28 by Najib, who is also the finance minister.

"That appears to rule out September, too, although Dr M would like it then," the MP said.

The FGVH listing, among others, was expedited to avoid fallout from the euro zone crisis.  
Economic factor

Civil servants and businessmen privately agree with Dr Mahathir in wanting an early election, citing the world economic outlook that could put pressure on the local economy.

"I am all for an early election. My tenants don't want to sign long leases until they know which government is in power," said a landlord with a number of lots in one of the capital city's shopping malls.

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) president Tan Sri Yong Poh Kon also called for early polls, saying the constant speculation and delays have affected the manufacturing industry.

"I am sure everyone in the business community would want the elections to be done with, and finished. It has created a certain amount of uncertainty.

"Decisions (about the future) would be much easier once elections are done with," said Yong.

Several initial public offerings (IPOs) have also been delayed because of the uncertain polling date, according to merchant bankers.

They noted that government-linked companies such as energy provider Gas Malaysia Bhd, integrated plantation group Felda Global Ventures Holdings Bhd, and medical services provider IHH Bhd have brought forward their public listing before world markets tumble

further due to the euro zone crisis.

A merchant banker said others are adopting a wait-and-see attitude.

"The PM must call elections soon as we have already delayed several IPOs for it. The markets are uncertain," he said, pointing to the Formula One and Manchester United listings being delayed in Singapore.

#### Election campaign

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the timing of the election, all political parties have begun their campaigns by increasing their outreach, holding daily rallies, and putting up flags in various parts of the country.

Najib himself has walked farther than any BN politician, with almost daily activities to meet all and sundry to drum up support ahead of the country's 13th general election.

The 1 Malaysia concept has been used to brand BN's efforts to win popular backing. His 1 Malaysia concept has been used as an umbrella for various initiatives, including the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) RM500 cash each for some 5.3 million households earning less than RM3,000 a month, a training scheme for youths called Skim Latihan 1 Malaysia (SL1M), affordable grocery shops named Kedai Rakyat 1 Malaysia (KR1M), 1 Malaysia clinics, and the latest, providing RM520 tyre vouchers for taxis this weekend under a scheme called Teksi Rakyat 1 Malaysia (TR1MA).

The son to second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, who did much to develop Malaysia, Najib has also taken to social media, setting up two Facebook accounts to cater to the English- and Mandarin-speaking communities. He also boasts of more than 500,000 followers on microblogging service Twitter.

He was recently at #TwtupKami in Stadium Nasional Bukit Jalil on June 9, a day-long national gathering of music, sports and other events that is said to be organised with help from the ruling coalition.

BN lawmakers said Najib praised the event at the pre-council meeting before the current parliamentary sitting, noting that he has encouraged them to embrace social media to find support among the first-time voters.

"Calculations and projections show that the result will depend on new voters, and many of the new voters are young voters. They will be kingmakers," Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin was quoted as saying after launching the PPP Youth convention here last Saturday.

Some 12 million are eligible to vote if elections are called this year, up from the nine million in 2008. According to Election Commission (EC) statistics, around 40 per cent of these are young voters.

These voters are said to eschew traditional media such as newspapers and television in favour of the Internet, leading to both BN and PR engaging them through social media and websites.

The big win

"Najib wants to win big, go past Pak Lah's 140 seat win and get back the two-thirds majority of at least 148. It won't happen now until the various campaigns take effect, so the elections won't happen as yet," a BN strategist said when summing up the election delay.

BN's internal survey results from March showed the ruling coalition can win 80 federal seats outright, with possible wins in 66 seats. Another report in May indicated that only 118 federal seats were within its grasp, prompting coalition strategists to call for a delay until the numbers get better.

It is understood a series of surveys are being done now for the BN chairman to consider before deciding on the polls.

Najib is personally spearheading efforts to drum up support for BN.

"There are issues to overcome, such as Bersih, some missteps by ministers like the PTPTN issue, the WWW15 number plate issue. They are small issues but they build up," said the BN strategist, referring to a student loan scheme suspended for a day in Selangor and a free premium vehicle registration number given to MCA deputy president and Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai, who later gave up the number after a public outcry.

"BN just asked for RM13.8 billion extra for the Budget. That will help it in the short term but not the long term until the various projects take off and pay back by 2020," a senior government official told The Malaysian Insider on condition of anonymity.

The official was referring to the various projects under the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) and feel-good initiatives under the Government Transformation Programme (GTP), which are expected to bear fruit by 2020.

"People need (to) feel good now if BN wants to win big," said the official.

That, the BN strategists said, is what Najib is doing. The man they call the hardest-working politician in Malaysia is going around the country solving problems that snowballed in the past decades, under the programme called "Jelajah Janji Ditepati (Promises Fulfilled Tour)".

The prime minister liked the "Janji Ditepati" tagline sufficiently for it to be made the theme for this year's Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day celebrations.

"He's fulfilling promises and expects that will help BN win the next election. It is a war that he wants to win," said one of the strategists, adding wryly, "but it takes time, so we wait."

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