

**BN leaders want quick polls, tired of pushy businessmen, unions**  
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**By Jahabar Sadiq**

KUALA LUMPUR, June 25 — Fatigue and the constant threat of being under the gun from special interest groups, businessmen, unions and warlords are making the prospect of a longer wait for polls unpalatable for Barisan Nasional (BN) ministers and leaders.

Sources told The Malaysian Insider that the consensus among ministers and BN leaders is that they want the polls sooner rather than at the end of the year. The reason: voters know that the polls are going to be a tough one for Umno/BN, so ministers are under pressure to give out contracts, licences, approved permits (APs) and other concessions.

If the ministers don't appear keen on meeting requests from party warlords and special interest groups, the sources say the ministers are told not so subtly that they could lose votes to Pakatan Rakyat (PR), which is gunning to capture Putrajaya in the next elections after its success in Election 2008.

"Sooner is better than later for the next elections. BN leaders cleared June and July for polls but now it seems it will be after the Budget, putting more pressure on them," a source told The Malaysian Insider.

The budget will be tabled on September 28. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak (picture) has not indicated when the polls will be held but said it could be called during the pilgrimage season around the haj on October 26.

BN ministers and leaders feel that if elections are called soon, the ruling federal coalition will win, not with two-thirds majority but better than Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's government in 2008.

Waiting till the later part of year is fraught with own risks of a slowing economy and the possibility of more infighting for seats and position, apart from more "threats and demands" from power brokers and unions, said another source.

He said that what was clear is that no one in BN, not the ministers or strategists, believes that the polls will be a walkover although Najib has said the coalition can get back its two-thirds majority and win in all 13 states and the Kuala Lumpur federal territory.

BN lost four states — Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor and failed to win Kelantan in 2008. It got back Perak in February 2009 after several PR lawmakers quit their pact, giving BN the majority.

The Malaysian Insider has learnt that the BN leaders privately agree it is tricky to get urban seats especially in the west coast of the Malay peninsula. The blunder over using what is seen as excessive force during the Bersih rallies in the past year has also reduced support for BN.

There is also concern over the fight to be the menteri besar in Johor, Kedah and Perlis. Umno is hoping to win back Kedah with deputy minister Datuk Mukhriz Mahathir as the top choice for the post although he doesn't hold a state party post while Johor MB Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman has been in office since 1995.

"Many are jostling for the MB posts and that is a headache for Najib," said a source, adding an initial list of MBs has already been prepared.

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 an emphatic victory so as not to share Abdullah's fate of losing his office despite getting a simple majority in 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 had told The Malaysian Insider.

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 were not revealed but are said to be even lower.

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.

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.

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.

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