

Dr M warns Najib against alienating BN members in run-up to polls
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KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 9 — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak should be careful not to further estrange members of his Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition that could cause them to lose power at polls due next April, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad told Bloomberg in a report published today.

The still influential former prime minister, who is seen to be Najib's mentor, was quoted by the business wire as saying any defections from the ruling coalition could "result in BN losing the next election."

The BN had just weeks earlier lost two senior federal lawmakers from Sabah — regarded as its safety deposit box for votes — after they pledged allegiance to the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) pact in the run-up to key national polls that could see a regime change in Southeast Asia's third largest economy for the first time in 55 years.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, a deputy prime minister-turned-opposition leader, has also hinted at the possibility of more defections from BN in the next few weeks.

The move appears to be shaking the BN's grip on power despite Najib's personal popularity, based on the latest survey by independent pollster Merdeka Center in June, that saw the sixth PM's ratings at 64 per cent even as the government he leads slipped six percentage points to 42 per cent for the same period.

"The problem here is not Najib — he is a leader of a weak government," Dr Mahathir told Bloomberg.

Najib has previously fuelled speculation of snap polls as early as last year but the delay in calling for elections appears to be motivated by his desire to win by a bigger margin than the BN did in Election 2008 when it lost its customary two-thirds control of the 222-seat Dewan Rakyat and four states to opposition parties.

Political analysts weighing in on the disparate ratings for Najib and his BN told Bloomberg the delay in calling for polls may be detrimental to the both the PM and his coalition.

Farish Ahmad Noor of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore told Bloomberg that Najib is unlikely to claw back a bigger victory for the BN despite the delay.

"I doubt that either side will be able to win an overwhelming victory.

"Under such circumstances, Najib's delay may serve the opposition better as they have more time to campaign among the young and the fence-sitters, which they are doing already," he was reported as saying.

Another political analyst, Ong Kian Ming who lectures at the UCSI University here, told Bloomberg Najib appeared to be distancing himself from his Umno party, which is the BN lynchpin, citing the PM's campaigns "that is more presidential in nature" than one that bats for the team.

"Umno is a party that is seen as corrupt and that has a lot of warlords with vested interests.

"He's effectively saying 'come and vote for me even if you don't like these things'," Ong was quoted as saying.

Ibrahim Suffian, who is director of the Merdeka Center that carried out the electoral surveys on Najib's and the BN's performances, was reported saying the government "is weak because it has to continuously relent to demands."

Najib appears to have styled himself a reformist and has introduced various economic, social and government policy changes in a bid to rocket Malaysia out of the middle-income trap and into the ranks of high-income nations by 2020, but has been seen to backtrack on some merit-based policies due to resistance from hawks within his party.

Since taking over office from Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in April 2009, Najib has delayed rolling back state subsidies on essential items and implementing a goods and services tax.

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