

Sabah BN leaders exit likely to delay polls, say sources
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By Jahabar Sadiq

KUALA LUMPUR, July 30 — The drawn-out exit of two Sabah Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders over the weekend is likely to delay a general election from a firm September date to the end of the year as the ruling coalition works to retain its “fixed deposit” in the Borneo states, say sources.

BN sources in Sabah and Kuala Lumpur say the pledge by Tuaran MP Datuk Seri Wilfred Bumburing and Beaufort MP Datuk Seri Lajim Ukin to support Pakatan Rakyat (PR) is among reasons that Datuk Seri Najib Razak is re-looking dates for a snap poll after Budget Day on September 28 for his personal mandate, some three years and three months after taking power in April 2009.

Najib is now said to be re-looking at new dates for a snap poll. — File pic
“It is not likely in September now although Umno and its partners are ready for the polls,” a BN source from Kuala Lumpur told The Malaysian Insider.

“Umno needs to make sure both Sabah and Sarawak remain a fixed deposit and provide the bulk of seats because the Malay vote is split in the peninsula,” the source added, referring to Umno’s share of only 79 seats in Election 2008.

Sources had earlier told The Malaysian Insider that a snap poll was likely to happen in September if Najib carries through a plan to dissolve Parliament in August, nine months before the BN mandate expires in April 2013. There have been a few dates bandied about in the past year although the country’s sixth prime minister has expressed confidence of sweeping the majority of all state and federal seats.

Before the latest defection, BN controlled 22 out of the 25 federal seats in Sabah and one in the Federal Territory of Labuan. In Election 2008, BN lost its customary two-thirds parliamentary majority largely due to significant losses in the peninsula, where it won just 85 seats while the opposition swept 80 seats.

BN’s saving grace was in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan where the pact trounced the opposition and made a near-clean sweep, winning 55 parliamentary seats to the opposition’s two. But after the weekend, BN now controls 136 federal seats while PR has 76 seats, SAPP two and eight independents in the 222-seat Dewan Rakyat.

A Sabah BN source also said a September date is unlikely due to the latest developments in the state, as the ruling coalition will have to ensure there are no serious ramifications from the walkout by the two senior Sabah MPs. Lajim is a deputy minister and Umno supreme council member while Bumburing is the United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) deputy president.

“They both don’t have much influence outside their areas but it could spread and prove to be a factor if polls are held soon. Then again, it can fester and still be a problem later on,” he added.

There has been speculation since June that Bumburing and Lajim would quit BN and support PR but it did not happen until the past weekend. "It is a mystery why BN didn't take action earlier against both of them," the Sabah BN source said.

Najib has said over the weekend that he will take action today over Lajim's move to drop all party posts. The prime minister has been focusing on Sabah lately and even announced a much-wanted royal commission of inquiry (RCI) into the state's illegals problem although no terms of reference or composition for the panel have been set yet.

Political analysts say BN has always treated Sabah and Sarawak as a sure-fire vote bank as it battles to regain the dominant Malay vote in the peninsula. "The loss of the Malay vote can be countered with votes from Sabah and Sarawak but now, no one is sure anymore if there is a fixed deposit," a political analyst told The Malaysian Insider on condition of anonymity.

UiTM Sabah lecturer Arnold Puyok said last week his research showed that the BN could lose more up to 14 seats it now holds in the state, adding the Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Pensiangan seats are being considered "easy wins" for the opposition. "I don't think the 'fixed deposit' will remain," he was reported as saying.

Najib's government has seen a slide in approval ratings with only 42 per cent giving a nod to his administration in a June survey carried out by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research in Peninsular Malaysia, dropping by six percentage points from a month earlier.

But the prime minister remains popular, with a 64 per cent approval rating in June, down from 65 per cent in May. His predecessor, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, went into Election 2008 with a 71 per cent approval rating but lost the customary two-thirds parliamentary majority and four states.

Najib is seen as the country's most hardworking politician with numerous visits to various districts including the latest round under the Jelajah Janji Ditepati (Promises Fulfilled Tour) and cash handouts and pledges to help various demographics.

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