

BN leaders brush off Dr M's 'weak government' prediction
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 20 — Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders shrugged off today Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's pessimism about its chances in the next general election, and predicted that the ruling coalition will fare better than it did in Election 2008 when it lost for the first time its two-thirds majority in Parliament.

Dr Mahathir said yesterday that he expects BN to emerge as a weak government in a tightly contested election expected soon, but leaders of the coalition disagreed with his assessment of its chances.

Tengku Adnan said BN walks the talk, 'not just talk, talk, talk'. They also disagreed with Dr Mahathir's suggestion that the Najib administration's cash handouts were a form of vote-buying but pointed out that the political veteran had also acknowledged that BN desperately needed to boost its popularity to ensure a stronger government after the coming polls.

"And we definitely want a stronger mandate, a stronger government to make changes to improve Malaysia.

"What we are saying is give (Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Najib (Razak) a chance. He will mend whatever shortcomings that have happened in the past," BN secretary-general Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor told The Malaysian Insider.

The Umno leader also agreed when asked if BN was likely to form a stronger government than before, pointing out that the pact has been known to deliver on its promises.

"Perception-wise... if you listen to perception, we work. We work hard and we walk the talk, not just talk, talk, talk," he said.

The same sentiment was echoed by Tengku Adnan's colleagues in BN.

"BN will do much better this round," MIC president Datuk G. Palanivel told The Malaysian Insider in a text message.

Palanivel said BN would do much better this round. He said cash handouts like the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M) should go on annually, adding that efforts should be made to introduce programmes tailored to benefit the less empowered.

"Realistically speaking, BN will of course rise with a stronger mandate. And we need that to implement longer term policies," said MCA vice-president Gan Ping Sieu.

"Of course, absolutely, we are much stronger now. We have a new prime minister. We have a bold transformation plan in place. We are on equal footing with the opposition in the cyber war," said Sabah Umno secretary Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahalan.

Dr Mahathir told a forum of business leaders yesterday that it was "likely" that BN would retain Putrajaya after the polls but may form a weak government which, he said, was undesirable as the coalition would then be more preoccupied with its political survival than governing the country.

He said the Najib administration's practice of handing out cash to Malaysians was "very close" to vote-buying, but admitted that the measure was to help give a quick boost to BN's support base ahead of elections.

Appearing on a stump for BN, the outspoken leader had said BN needed a strong government to help it implement policies that may be "unpleasant" but would be beneficial to the country in the long term.

Any government formed with a weak parliamentary majority could be toppled easily through mass defections, Dr Mahathir had warned.

"Every country needs a strong government so that long-term policies can be implemented even though they may make the government unpopular.

"Otherwise, the concentration is more on politics than on policies. But without a strong government, it would be very difficult to carry out these things... like the GST (Goods and Services Tax).

"We are looking at serious transformation of our subsidy system. And it was not implemented earlier due to the possibility of a terrible political backlash," the MCA's Gan said.

Gan said BN will get a stronger mandate.

Abdul Rahman described Dr Mahathir's remarks as "brilliant", saying the former prime minister's message was to tell voters to return a strong BN government if they wanted the country to prosper.

"It is brilliant. Dr Mahathir is a smart man. Do not take his words at mere face value. Go beyond the surface and what he is saying is that if the people want a strong government that is serious about administering the country, then you better return a strong government... don't put a weak government there because it will be preoccupied with survival," the east Malaysian politician said.

Abdul Rahman also took note of Dr Mahathir's remarks on the Najib administration's cash handouts but said the political veteran was merely airing his preference.

"If you read his words carefully... it is not the focus on vote-buying. He is just saying that he despises cash handouts, and it is better to build facilities," he said.

He added that Malaysians should not be regarded as foolish voters who would vote for a government simply because they had received these one-off cash payments.

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MIC secretary-general Datuk S. Murugessan pointed out that logically speaking, BN's introduction of the RM500 cash payments under the BR1M programme was not tailored to "buy votes".

He pointed out that the pact's support base was largely the lower-income group and if BN had wanted to fish for support, it would have instead handed out cash to those in the higher-income bracket.

"When the PM came up with BR1M, it was after he went to the ground and met with so many citizens who spoke of their hardships. BR1M was to help them with emergencies, especially for these lower-income earners," he said.

The government is expected to announce a second round of RM500 cash handouts to lower-income households when Budget 2013 is tabled next week, in a move that is seen as giving Najib and his BN pact's ratings a boost ahead of polls expected soon.

The first round of handouts under BR1M, which involved some five million families and cost taxpayers RM2.6 billion, saw Najib's approval ratings shoot up to 69 per cent, largely due to a surge of support from low-income households.

BN coalition sources have said that several recent surveys show that BN needs to work harder to get a convincing victory especially with some 2.2 million voters casting ballots for the first time. The next general election is only due after April 2013 when BN's mandate expires.

It is understood the compilation of surveys had revealed that BN could win up to 146 parliamentary seats with at least 80 sure wins, more than the 140 it won in Election 2008.

Najib's approval rating from the Chinese and Indian communities had slipped after the April 28 Bersih 3.0 rally, but the latest survey by pollster Merdeka Center showed the leader's percentage points climb to 69 per cent, largely due to a surge of support from poorer Malaysians.

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