

## **Najib digs in for the long haul**

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**With Umno polls postponed, it looks like Najib will lead Umno and Barisan Nasional into the next elections which have to be held by mid-2018. His fate at the next party polls will then depend very much on the elections showing.**

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's announcement that Umno polls will be postponed by 18 months is clear indication that he is not going to step down anytime soon as Umno president and by extension give up the office of prime minister.

That he has got Umno supreme council backing for this shows the power of incumbency that he wields, convincing most of the council members that the polls should be postponed in the interests of the party and to prepare for the next elections.

It is ironic that the very rules that former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad introduced are making it difficult for any incumbent Umno president to be removed. The rules came with the new Umno that Mahathir created following his near defeat by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah for the president's post in 1987.

Najib said after a supreme council meeting in Kuala Lumpur on June 26 that apart from strengthening the party, the move will ensure that Umno and other Barisan Nasional component parties were stronger come the next general election.

He added that it was nothing out of the ordinary, pointing out that his predecessors, Mahathir and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, had made such postponements using the same rationale too.

“This does not mean that Umno is not a democratic party, that we are denying the spirit of democracy and openness.

“Based on the party's new constitution, we are more open in deciding the type of leadership at all levels.

“The supreme council had also decided that the methods used in the party election be scrutinised so that more appropriate methods are used,” he said, adding that input from all levels of the party leadership would be taken into account.

Asked why such an early announcement was made, Najib denied that it was such.

“It (the announcement) was not made early. We don’t want anything happening that can shift the focus or make things worse,” he said.

Mahathir, although remaining sanguine about the postponement of the Umno polls, must realise that his efforts to remove Najib from his positions of power will be that much more difficult because of the rules he himself introduced into Umno. It effectively means that Najib, if he so chooses, will lead the party into the next elections due mid-2018.

Umno party polls are due around October 2016, the last one being held in October 2013. Pushing the elections forward will put the new date for party polls in mid-2018. General elections were in May 2013 and will be due again by mid-2018.

Given the dates, most likely the general elections will take place first and then the party polls, which implies that Najib will take Umno and Barisan Nasional into the general elections. His fate in the party polls will then depend on how well he does at the general elections.

If we assume that the general elections are held sometime in the first half of 2018, then it will be some three years from now, during which time he will have to hope that issues such as 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) and other matters affecting the country will be pretty much resolved.

If not resolved, then he has to hope that memories fade and that people are likely to forget even if they are not likely to forgive when the time comes. Until that time, there is little that anyone, including Mahathir, can do about removing him over the 1MDB issue.

Umno seems pretty much behind Najib despite all the negative reports and many unanswered questions over 1MDB, and no person of any stature within Umno has clearly and unambiguously broken ranks with Najib, although some may be posturing to show that they are willing to step in if there is indeed a leadership change.

For Mahathir, the rules he dictatorially imposed on the new Umno, following the deregistration of the old in 1987, has come back to bite him with a vengeance, making his efforts to unseat Najib rather difficult. Despite what Najib or Mahathir says, those rules have resulted in a substantial erosion of democracy within Umno.

Consider this. Even if Najib does badly in the next elections but manages to retain power, it would be very difficult for anyone to unseat him as the sitting Umno president because any nomination for president must have the support of 30% of branches. This is difficult to obtain in an atmosphere where the president wields so much power and is able to marginalise any branch chairman who challenges him.

This is very different from the Umno of old. Tengku Razaleigh needed just one nomination and a seconder to challenge Mahathir in 1987. So did Sulaiman Palestin who challenged Hussein Onn in 1978. Only Mahathir came close to losing and when he won narrowly, he changed the rules.

Mahathir supposedly decided to announce his retirement from the top position in 2003 because he received advice that Umno may lose in the polls if he continued. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stepped into his shoes and then took Barisan Nasional to a resounding victory in 2004 on promises of a clean government which appealed to voters. Barisan got 92% of parliamentary seats and 65% of the popular vote.

But in 2008, Abdullah's campaign lay in shambles when Barisan, although it won, made its worst showing ever, losing an unprecedented five states, including Selangor. The result surprised even the opposition who never thought they could make such huge inroads.

The pressure on Abdullah mounted with Mahathir applying some, and Abdullah, never one to cling to anything, ceded power to Najib and opted for a quieter life.

Najib will be no Abdullah. He has made his intention very clear and there is little that anyone can do about it – he is digging in for the long term. The only thing that will defeat him is the general elections. But the opposition right now is in shambles.

Much will depend on how the issues of the day pan out in the next two to three years. Will 1MDB be a distant memory or, more likely, will all the problems now being postponed by desperate measures come home to roost?

What will the economy be like then? Where will the ringgit be? Will inflation have tapered off by that time after the imposition of the goods and services tax in April this year? Where will the oil price be? What will be the state of all the mega projects then? Will the mass rapid transit system in Kuala Lumpur be operating smoothly? Will we be closer to achieving developed country status? And what new scandals will crop up?

Najib has bought himself valuable time – three years of it. The question is, can he use it wisely enough to turn the current tide of public opinion against him? Will the divided opposition be able to muster enough support to win? And if Najib scrapes in despite everything, will that necessarily mean he has to step down in the party polls shortly after?

And what does all of that mean for the rest of us?

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