

Mahathir predicts Najib's downfall in elections

Free Malaysia Today

April 12, 2017

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KUALA LUMPUR: The six-decade rule of Prime Minister Najib Razak's ruling coalition may finally be nearing an end, according to Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister.

"We think the sentiment on the ground is so strong that we will get the support of the majority of the people," Mahathir Mohamad, who left office in 2003, said in an interview in his Putrajaya office Tuesday. Once a staunch Najib ally, the 91-year-old Mahathir has spent the last two years campaigning for his removal amid a steady flow of corruption allegations that the premier has denied.

While the next election isn't due until the middle of 2018, speculation is widespread in political circles that Najib will call a snap poll later this year as he seeks to extend six decades of unbroken rule for his coalition. Opposition groups are banking on the fact that rising living costs will undermine support for Najib.

An opposition victory could see the unpopular consumption tax on goods and services reduced from 6%, Mahathir said. It wouldn't be abolished, he added, saying that "may cause some problem with government financing." Non-essential projects could also be canceled, he added.

"Everybody you talk to today, anybody at all, none have good words for the government, especially for Najib," Mahathir said.

Cash Handouts

Despite negative headlines, languishing consumer sentiment and sluggish economic growth, Malaysia's opposition parties have struggled to make a dent in Najib's support.

With increased cash handouts to farmers, government workers and low-income earners, Najib appears to have shrugged off the scandals that had threatened to engulf him, and retained the backing of key division chiefs within his United Malays National Organisation (Umno). The party is the most influential partner of Barisan Nasional, one of the world's longest running ruling coalitions.

Instead of competing against each other, four major opposition parties will compete as an alliance, Mahathir said. He acknowledged that the failure to include another opposition party — Parti Islam se-Malaysia — would boost Najib's alliance.

“We will consider anybody else contesting as being supporters of Najib, supporters of BN,” Mahathir said. “Because the effect would be to reduce votes going for the coalition, split the votes of the opposition, which in case will of course help Najib to win.”

Uphill Battle

Mahathir, who founded a new political party last year that’s making a more concerted effort to woo Malay voters — the country’s dominant ethnic group — is facing an uphill battle to lure support away from Umno, particularly in the rural heartland that hasn’t changed hands in decades.

Wracked by policy infighting since the last election in 2013 — when it won the popular vote for the first time — the opposition has handed Barisan Nasional easy victories in several provincial elections.

Mahathir said the opposition hasn’t decided on who will be prime minister should it win. The issue was a divisive one and “not relevant unless you win,” he said, declining to identify possible candidates for the role.

Still, Mahathir said, he hopes to have a “good margin” of victory to translate into a “good, strong government.”

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Source: <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/04/12/mahathir-predicts-najibs-downfall-in-elections/>