

BN to retain Putrajaya, says former Singapore envoy
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ST Global Forum discussion on next general election concludes 1MDB, billion-dollar deals with China will have no impact on how the majority vote.

PETALING JAYA: Barisan Nasional (BN) will continue its hold on Putrajaya by winning the next general election (GE14), as the status quo in Sabah and Sarawak and support from Malays in Peninsular Malaysia will remain, The Straits Times (ST) reported.

This was the conclusion drawn from an ST Global Forum panel discussion held in Singapore yesterday. The forum was entitled Malaysia's Next GE: The Perils And Prospects.

"I don't think that it will be worse than what Prime Minister Najib Razak or the BN obtained in 2013.

"For the Malay voters, I think they will stick with what they know," said Ong Keng Yong, who is ambassador-at-large at Singapore's ministry of foreign affairs and a former high commissioner to Malaysia.

Another speaker at the forum, Merdeka Center director Ibrahim Suffian concurred, saying that even though Najib's popularity remains low, BN remains the most trusted brand among Malay voters.

According to the Singapore daily, the rationale proffered by the speakers, which also included OCBC Bank Treasury Research and Strategy head Selena Ling, was that all the billion-dollar scandals and headline-grabbing deals with China would not have an impact on the vast majority of voters.

Describing the issues surrounding 1MDB as "approaching historical status", Ibrahim said many Malaysians have gone beyond the issue.

"1MDB has now been bundled as just being part of what is perceived as leadership weaknesses," he was quoted as saying.

Ong believes the cases that have emerged over allegations linked to 1MDB in other countries, including Singapore, the United States and Switzerland, has only affected Kuala Lumpur's standing from an international standpoint, but it "has not greatly harmed Najib or Umno" in the homefront.

Meanwhile, Ling told the forum that Malaysia's economic data was healthy, but that too would be of minimal consequence.

“When it comes to elections, people are going to vote on bread-and-butter issues. It is not going to be because growth is 5% or less than 5%,” she said, according to ST.

The panellists all agreed that Najib’s biggest challenge will be overcoming the growing unrest over the cost of living, with the GST and lower value of the ringgit having an impact on the price of goods.

The reality on the ground remains harsh according to Ibrahim who spoke about the struggles of Malaysians, both young and old.

“Young people are worried about finding a good job, married couples are concerned about whether they can afford a home and whether they can get a pay rise, while most retirees do not have sufficient savings to tide them over,” he was quoted as saying by ST.

The speculation over when Najib will call for GE14 is mixed with some predicting it will be held in the last quarter of this year, or early next year.

However, the prime minister has until next June to decide when he wants to dissolve Parliament.

The Federal Constitution states that a general election needs to be called when Parliament is dissolved or it reaches a maximum term of five years. The current Parliament kicked off its term on June 24, 2013, therefore Parliament will automatically be dissolved as of June 24, 2018.

As a general election needs to be called no later than two months after Parliament is dissolved, therefore, the last possible date for the next general election (GE14) will be August 24, 2018.

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