

Malaysia's next election: Why Najib dithers

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Malaysia has been in general election fever for almost a year, if not more. The power to dissolve Parliament, which will lead to a general election, lies with Prime Minister Najib Razak. He has been very busy touring the country to give speeches that can easily be taken as campaigning. But he does not seem ready to make the actual call.

Some say that Datuk Seri Najib is strategising and waiting for the right time. Others suggest that he is dithering because he is not sure if he can produce a sufficiently good electoral result to secure his own premiership for the foreseeable future. And some say that indecisiveness is his trademark.

Whichever it is, Mr Najib does have good reasons to dither. The best time to call an election was probably last year, when the opposition block was in tatters.

But Mr Najib missed the opportunity and now he has to carefully weigh the risks.

The opposition parties are slowly and gradually uniting under the newly formed Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. And Umno is being rocked by Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), led by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, former prime minister and former Umno president, and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who was deputy prime minister and Umno deputy president until he was sacked by Mr Najib last year.

Even though PH's registration as a political party has not been approved yet, Dr Mahathir has been named as the coalition's chairman. Interestingly, he is now working with Anwar Ibrahim, a former deputy prime minister whom he sacked back in 1998. Anwar is PH's overall leader, or ketua umum.

The new partnership between these two old foes creates a lot of uncertainties, adding to Mr Najib's dithering.

For the upcoming general election - known as GE14 because it will be Malaysia's 14th - Barisan Nasional (BN), the Umno-led ruling coalition, looks confident at the federal level. But the situation is less certain if we examine the situation state by state. Under Dr Mahathir's aggressive drive, PH is making headway in quite a few states.

In the northern state of Kedah, many are saying that PPBM has a good chance because it is Dr Mahathir's home state. He and his family are well liked there. His son, Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir, is vice-president of the party and is the leading candidate for chief minister if they win. That has a lot of traction among voters, especially the younger ones.

PH is also making headway in the relatively more multi-ethnic Perak. The state was won by the opposition coalition in the 2008 General Election, only to see Umno taking over after defections in the state legislative assembly a year later. Umno retained the state in GE13, but their majority is a wafer-thin three seats. The opposition remains popular. When Dr Mahathir toured Perak last month, thousands gathered to hear him.

A surprise is perhaps in the offing in the southern state of Johor. Traditionally known as an Umno bastion, Johor has suddenly turned risky. Dr Mahathir chose this state for his first speech after being named chairman of PH. Many of the Malay villagers I met at that event in July in Kota Tinggi said they are Umno members and will not leave the party for fear of victimisation. But they will vote for PPBM as they are upset with the way Mr Najib treats Mr Muhyiddin, a Johorean. Mr Muhyiddin, as Johor state chairman for PH, has been mobilising his people and quietly penetrating Umno strongholds. The strength of the silent protest is difficult to measure and that is why things have become risky for Umno there.

The biggest question mark hangs over Sabah and Sarawak. These two states have been BN's vote bank for years. But state nationalism is strengthening in both states. The locals are demanding greater autonomy from Peninsular Malaysia. PH is riding on this wave by allowing local opposition parties and local figures to lead their campaign there, without demanding that they officially join the coalition. This helps create the impression that their movement is local to the states, rather than being led by

Peninsular politicians, as is the case for BN component parties over which Umno has an iron grip.

In 2008, then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi led Umno to retain the federal government, but lost four states to the opposition. Umno subsequently pushed Datuk Seri Abdullah out of office and Mr Najib was the main beneficiary from that putsch. But that was also a lesson to Mr Najib, who knows it is not enough to win the polls at the federal government level because if Mr Abdullah was forced to resign after performing badly in the states, then he is also at risk of becoming a victim of the precedent that he himself set.

That is why Mr Najib needs to improve the outlook for state-level polls before calling a general election. He is working hard to ensure just that and there are indications that his strategy may be working. He has successfully pulled the Malay-majority Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) out from PH by dangling issues like the supremacy of Islam and Malays as carrots.

Mr Najib does not need PAS to join his BN coalition. He just needs to be confident enough that PAS will put candidates in as many seats as possible, therefore creating three-cornered fights nationwide. Such a situation will split opposition votes and that is a sure tactic to benefit Umno and BN. Once he can confirm that, there will be no more reason to dither.

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