



Delayed Umno Poll A Tactical Ploy

The announcement that Umno is postponing its party election to after the country's poll has prompted a host of theories, allegations and speculation.

ON SEPT 28, THE UMNO SUPREME COUNCIL AT ITS MONTHLY MEETING decided to postpone next year's party election until after the general election, sparking speculation that the latter would be held earlier than its 2009 due date.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is also Umno President, and his deputy, Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, quickly stepped in to quash the speculation.

It did not dampen the enthusiasm of the rumour mill. Instead, it prompted the pundits to speculate that the party election was being delayed because Umno is reluctant to face its members given current developments.

On Oct 5, Abdullah said he had no reason to go to the ballot box early. He was reported as saying: 'Why should I? Give me a reason why I should. Why should I seek a bigger mandate? The mandate that I have is a very safe mandate and I still have a lot of time to deliver what I promised to the people.'

Abdullah is correct. He won a huge mandate in 2004 and has until March 2009 to call for a general election. But given the current situation, it would be a tough call for the Prime Minister to repeat the 2004 whopping success.

Since he has both the mandate and the time to deliver his promises until the next general election falls due, his reason for postponing the Umno election becomes somewhat suspicious.

According to Abdullah, who won uncontested in the 2004 party election after an attempt by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah faltered, the election was postponed to enable the party to concentrate its efforts on winning the general election.

It was this argument that led to speculation that Abdullah would call for a general election as early as next year. Despite his denial, he could still call the polls ahead of the March 2009 due date.

Ironically it was Abdullah's own reason for delaying the party election that provided the impetus for the speculation that the general election would be held much earlier than March 2009.

Announcing the postponement of the party election on Sept. 28, Abdullah said the purpose was to enable Umno leaders to concentrate on achieving victory in the general election.

If the Supreme Council's reason for delaying the party election

was to prepare for the general election, it was logical for the people to expect the election to be held sooner than later.

In more recent days, however, Abdullah sounded agitated when asked by the Press if he was calling an early general election, and he kept referring to the fact that he received a big mandate in the last one.

With Abdullah and fellow Supreme Council members repeatedly denying that an early election would be called, the attention is once again focused on the internal situation of the party.

There is indeed fear that the current situation, which is a mixture of politics and economy, could produce some unexpected outcome should the party election be held as scheduled next year.

Tackling the two biggest challenges

Abdullah's two biggest challenges are the perception that he has not done enough to fulfil the massive mandate of the 2004 general election and the continuing criticism of his administration by his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

There have been open criticisms within and outside Umno that the Prime Minister does not seem to be fully in charge and that many of his promises are left undelivered.

Instead, some aspects of everyday life have deteriorated. Consumer prices are rising, essential goods are either in short supply or missing from the shelves, the crime rate is rising and so is unemployment.

Despite having considerable influence on the mainstream media – many of whose editors and news controllers were appointed during his tenure – the Prime Minister seems unable to make his views better understood.

Instead, his recent appearance on TV3 went terribly wrong when, instead of quashing allegations that his family members enjoyed special preference in politics and business, his sweeping denials were later proven to be largely inaccurate.

Dr Mahathir, on his part, does not appear to be letting up in his attacks on Abdullah and his Government. If at all, the former Prime Minister, who was personally responsible for anointing Abdullah as his successor, is fully estranged from the party's mainstream.

The last straw was when the party mounted a strong campaign to frustrate Dr Mahathir's attempt to be elected as an ordinary delegate for Kubang Pasu – his old constituency – to the party's general assembly in Kuala Lumpur next month.

Dr Mahathir officially accused the party of engaging in money politics and five delegates to the Sept 9 divisional meeting lodged a complaint with the party's disciplinary board, alleging voting irregularities.

Taking note of the current administration's mantra of transparency, accountability and openness, the postponement of the Umno election could be justified only if the general election is held soon.

But that may not happen if the Prime Minister is telling the truth. Thus, those who think the party is reluctant to face its members in an election next year may be correct after all.

This may not go down well with members who are already split in their views over some of the key decisions of the Abdullah Administration in the last three years.

They will most certainly see the postponement as an attempt by the leadership to deprive them of their democratic right, more so now when there are party stalwarts, including Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who are speaking openly against the party and the Government.

If Abdullah has no intention of calling for an early election, what could possibly be his agenda in postponing the party poll?

Honeymoon period over

Comparing the situation that prevailed during the last party election in 2004, which was held only months after the landslide victory in the general election, with the one that exists today, one can easily sense Abdullah's predicament.

At that election, literally all top party posts – President, Deputy President, Wanita Chief, Youth Chief and Puteri Chief – were won uncontested. A tentative challenge mounted by Tengku Razaleigh against Abdullah fizzled out very quickly. Abdullah's position then was unassailable.

The no-contest victories were, in no small way, attributed to the Mahathir era practice of discouraging contests for the highest party posts, on the pretext of preserving party unity.

Given the prevailing situation, the outcome of neither the party nor the general election is likely to mirror that of 2004, when the honeymoon was at its peak.

Many top posts may see a contest if the party election is held as scheduled next year. Even Abdullah may see his position tested. So postponing it until after the general election gives the present leadership a much-needed breathing space.

This has to be what Abdullah meant when he said the mandate he has is very safe and that he still has a lot of time to deliver what he promised.

The reprieve gives Abdullah time to buttress his position and confront his growing band of detractors more effectively.

Abdullah must have by now realised that Dr Mahathir is gaining support not because the people want him to make a comeback but rather because they share his thoughts, and that his criticism of the Government reflects their own concerns.

In brief, the former Prime Minister is not likely to fade away easily, nor will the many problems the people are now facing. The sugar shortage, for instance, has been going on for months without any sign of being over soon.

Dr Mahathir is going to be a major discomfort to Abdullah and Umno. Having systematically ostracised him, the Supreme Council and the Cabinet seem not to know what to do with him. He has been checkmating their every move.

First they ignored him. According to an aide, he can recall only two ministers visiting Dr Mahathir in the last few months. Then when he was seen in the company of the non-governmental organisations and opposition politicians, they said he should use the Umno platform to air his grievances.

But when Umno units started to invite him to attend their functions, orders went out for the invitations to be withdrawn.

In the case of the Padang Besar division in Perlis, the state liaison committee went to the extent of ensuring that the organisers were deprived of venues to hold the function. The division relented and the event was cancelled.

And when he announced his decision to contest to be one of the seven independent Kubang Pasu delegates to the general assembly, the whole might of the State Umno was mobilised to ensure his defeat.

Sending an unmistakable message

The party's most recent action suggests that the fear of Dr Mahathir is mounting. The sacking of an ordinary member, Abu Zaharin Yassin, for criticising Abdullah was a classic example.

The only factor that differentiates Zaharin, a former divisional secretary, from other Abdullah critics in Umno is that he publishes a blog (*Sang Kelembai*).

The Supreme Council made abundantly clear that it wanted to make a lesson of Zaharin by sacking him from the party when the disciplinary board, which heard his case, had recommended that he be given a suspension until the next party election.

Zaharin became the first Umno blogger to suffer the wrath of the Supreme Council for using this new communication medium to criticise the Prime Minister.

In using the big stick against a low-ranking member like Zaharin, the party is sending an unmistakable message to other members, especially those with the power to influence the outcome of party election, that dissension is unacceptable.

Abdullah is clearly counting on things getting better between now and 2009 when his mandate runs out. Postponing the party election is a shrewd move by him. He knows it is easier to fight in a general election than in a party election.

His answer lies in the Ninth Malaysia Plan. He has repeatedly portrayed the five-year plan as the cornerstone of his administration, thus the retiming of the party election.

The implementation of the plan will take a few years to show results, more so for the expenditure to trickle down to the ordinary people, especially the rural Malays who form the backbone of the party.

It is unlikely that the full impact of the plan, especially the money part, will reach the lowest denominator in the 'feeding' chain until

a year or two from now.

In recent weeks, Abdullah has been priming the implementation system by ordering government departments and agencies to speed up disbursement of outstanding development allocations and to pay up contractors.

On the other hand, there are also compelling reasons for Abdullah to consider calling for an early election. There is nothing to suggest that challenge to his leadership may not gain momentum or that the economic situation will not worsen.

While some aspects of the economy like the stock exchange, the ringgit and foreign direct investment, are not performing as well as those in competing regional economies, the commodities are doing well though crude oil prices are softening.

Politically, Abdullah will be the last person to under-rate the effects the economy has on the mood of the party. In recent decades, Umno has become vulnerable to changing economic fortunes.

One of the key considerations that prompted Tengku Razaleigh and Tun Musa Hitam to mount a challenge against Dr Mahathir in 1987 was the perception that the latter had been weakened by the recession two years earlier. Abdullah was a key member of the team.

So his denial could be tactical. He cannot afford to alert the opposition and prompt the lobbying for candidacy within his own party and the Barisan Nasional coalition.

Then there is the Anwar Ibrahim spectre. Should the ballot be held at the end of the current parliamentary term, that is 2009, the ban on Anwar would be over and he would certainly become an important element in the election.

Should the general election not be held until 2009, the existing Umno leadership will be serving without direct mandate from members for at least two years.

That extra period will certainly be useful for Abdullah and the incumbents. They could use the added time to strengthen and entrench themselves, which would be to the disadvantage of aspiring leaders when the party election eventually comes around. **mb**

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