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Malaysian Elections: Abdullah's Own Prediction

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Speculations about when general elections will be called in Malaysia have been circulating in the country for months. Since the present parliament began its five-year mandate on 17 May 2004, and given that the present ruling states that elections have to be called within 60 days after the end of that five-year period, Premier Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi has until mid-July 2009 to call for polls.

The minister in Datuk Seri Abdullah's office, the de facto "law minister" Nazri Aziz, had been doing some calculations and recently told the Malaysian Chinese daily, *Guangming Ribao*, that he did not expect elections to be held before Chinese New Year, i.e. 7 February 2008. In fact, based on past parliamentary records, chances are that polls would not be called before the present parliament was in its fourth year.

However, Datuk Seri Abdullah himself has decided to play the Sphinx as far as Malaysia's 12th general elections are concerned, and is not letting anything slip that might fuel further speculation. He reiterates that he has yet to receive any "inspiration" for deciding on a date.

However, what he thinks, or at least what he used to think, about the dynamics involved in the timing of Malaysian elections happens to be documented. In August 1989, Abdullah Badawi was visiting Singapore, and gave a talk at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). He had not long before that been elected vice-president of the newly registered UMNO Baru, meaning that he had left the ranks of UMNO dissidents led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Musa Hitam, and returned to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed's fold.

During the serious conflicts that had seen the old UMNO split and declared illegal, Datuk Seri Abdullah had left his position as Minister of Defence, a spot he had filled for only a year. Although returned to the top echelons in the party by the time he visited Singapore in August 1989, he would not be called back into the Cabinet until after the general elections of October 1990. At IPS, Datuk Seri Abdullah spoke at a closed-door seminar on "Malaysian Politics". He was asked whether general elections would soon be called by Tun Dr Mahathir. Since this was during the question-and-answer session, his reply was spontaneously given and can be assumed to reflect correctly what he sincerely thought about the issue at that time.

Basically, he made three points:

"If you study the history of Malaysian elections, every time we completed our third year and are going into the fourth year, we talked about elections, without fail. That is one point you may wish to remember. The second point you may wish to remember is that all our general elections have been held in the fourth year of our term in office. That is also a fact. I am not making a guess here. So now the Prime Minister is reminding us about the elections but when they'll take place I do not know. The statement that he has made in so many places – in Kelantan I think – that now we enjoy economic prosperity, now there is a measure of political stability and UMNO has been completely rehabilitated, means that he believes that if we go for election between now and April 1991, we will win. So the point that we will win is a very important point. The government will hold a general election only if the party can win. So it can happen any time."

Where his own first term is concerned, Abdullah's first point about the curious Malaysian phenomenon that speculations about early polls come alive immediately after the third year is correct. His own third year ended in April 2007, for example, and speculations have been doing the rounds in Malaysia and elsewhere that elections are around the corner.

When he spoke at IPS in August 1989, the third year of Mahathir's second term in office had just passed. Elections had been held in early August 1986, with the old UMNO gaining its own majority for the first time. Mahathir's warning to voters then that racial riots and further economic downturn threatened should the ruling coalition secure less than a two-thirds majority, had worked very well.

Since that victory, however, severely contentious events had changed the political landscape, including demonstrations that led to the arrest in October 1987 of 106 individuals without trial under the infamous Internal Security Act, as well as the challenge mounted against Mahathir by Tengku Razaleigh and Musa Hitam in 1988 that almost toppled the prime minister, and that split UMNO right down the middle.

Abdullah's second point that elections in Malaysia were always held in the fourth mandate year was true only of the three elections held after 1974. Elections before that

were all held in the fifth year. As it turned out, the next elections were held in the second month of the fifth year, in October 1990.

However, if what Abdullah said holds true today, then elections will be called by April 2008, which is what most pundits seem to predict today. This would also keep Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister from running for parliament. There is a ban on him consequential to his imprisonment for misuse of power.

Incidentally, all elections since 1990 have been held in the fifth year, except for 1999, when it was held in the fourth year. This took place in the aftermath of the 1998 Reformasi movement when the government feared that support for the opposition would get stronger the longer it put off the polling date.

This brings us to Abdullah's third point, which is that "the government will hold a general election only if the party can win". Taken literally, this provides little information since no one really believes that UMNO can lose, given how the electoral system and the party's historically permanent incumbency work to its advantage.

As things now look, the prime minister's timing will be decided by what he today calls "the feel-good factor". His concern is to pinpoint a date when the wind is not blowing too strongly against the coalition.

Given the fact the demonstrations are becoming a common thing in the Klang Valley, the feel-good factor is presently not working to the government's advantage. The need to lower food and fuel subsidies in the coming months, which will immediately hurt the lower income group, makes it even less likely that Abdullah will pick a date any time soon.

According to his own rationale from 1989, elections will most likely be held, not in the fourth year, but the fifth year, and later rather than sooner.

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