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Who's calling whose bluff?

by Ooi Kee Beng

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MILLIONS of Malaysian eyes were focused on Sept 16 this week. That day has now come and gone, and the government is still in power despite opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's claim that he has the means to fell Premier Abdullah Badawi's administration.

He had asked that day to meet the Prime Minister in order to provide the latter with the names of parliamentarians willing to cross over to his coalition, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR). But Mr Abdullah refused, asserting that Mr Anwar was merely seeking to gain political mileage out of such a meeting.

But what if Mr Anwar isn't bluffing?

If that is the case, and his use of the date of Sept 16 to destabilise the government and lure East Malaysian MPs to his side has actually succeeded, then Malaysia is in a transitional stage where PR is working out the details of how the handover of power can best take place without violence and without the Internal Security Act (ISA) being used on more of its members.

Then, the first date to watch would be Sept 24, when Mr Anwar appears in court to face his sodomy charge again. He will be tempted to have things over and done with by that time to minimise risks for himself personally.

The government's hasty release of journalist Tan Chee Hoon and Selangor state assemblywoman Teresa Kok, both surprisingly arrested under the ISA last week, shows that Mr Abdullah does not have good control over his Cabinet, and that Umno's Supreme Council is doing damage control and trying to focus on Mr Anwar. Had Ms Kok not been released, a new crisis would have built up within the ruling coalition.

Next, there is Oct 12, when Parliament returns from its uncustomary Ramadan break. The Budget will be hotly debated then, but also the government's use of the ISA.

And once Parliament is in session, and if Mr Anwar has not been bluffing, then he and his allies are at liberty to move for a no-confidence motion against Mr Abdullah's Cabinet. Should Parliament pass the motion and if BN respects the constitution, then the Abdullah government will step down and the Malaysian King will have to appoint someone else to form a functioning government with majority support in Parliament.

What could also happen — and this seems most likely if things do come this far — is that the King decides to dissolve the eight-month-old Parliament and call for new elections, which need not affect governments at the state level.

But what if Mr Anwar is not bluffing, and Mr Abdullah knows it but is pulling a bluff of his own to gain time, parrying every move that Mr Anwar can make to carry out his threat, until he himself is ready to make the next move in this extended drama?

Then Malaysia may expect to see draconian measures taken against the opposition, with Mr Abdullah and his Cabinet doing all they can to crush the opposition parties. The ISA would then be widely used.

Given how five states are governed by the opposition today, such a move by Mr Abdullah would be the least wise of the few alternatives he has at his disposal. It would also break up the BN for good.

But if Mr Anwar is indeed bluffing, and if he has failed to persuade enough lawmakers from the ruling BN to defect, then the situation is one — at least in Parliament — where the majority will continue ruling, but with no real possibility of amending the Constitution. It will also have to deal with a very loud and bold opposition of 81 MPs snapping at its heels throughout the remainder of its five-year mandate.

It will also be an opposition that will aggressively seek to topple the BN every chance it gets.

If Anwar is bluffing, then this scenario will be the most stable for the country in the near future. The United Malays National Organisation (Umno) will go on to solve its leadership problems as best it can, perhaps by Dec 16 or 17 at its general assembly. Otherwise, Mr Abdullah will leave in time, supposedly earlier than mid-2010, with his deputy Najib Abdul Razak's camp — in tandem with the increasing speed at which it will be handed more power — edging him out faster than he might imagine.

Within Umno may grow a Najib-Khairi Jamaluddin camp to limit rising internal opposition from an increasingly confident Mukhriz Mahathir and his allies.

Umno, by then controlling BN without any pretence at consensual decision making, will hang on to power ... at least until the next general election.

However, at least in the longer term, given how diverse political representation has become in Malaysia, we may expect a more decentralised form of federalism with different parties entrenched in different states, and a looser form of coalitional culture at the centre.

The central-line type of political “debate”, if that had ever been the right word to use, will dissipate in time, along with the notion that ruling coalitions are forever.

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies. His latest book is *Lost in Transition: Malaysia under Abdullah* (SIRD & ISEAS 2008).