



Viewpoints contain background analyses and comments on critical global and regional trends, issues and developments. *Viewpoints* also occasionally include analytical reviews of ISEAS books. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of ISEAS.

Politics in Malaysia

Has the road to reform caved in?

By Ooi Kee Beng

For the Straits Times, Dated 21 December 2007

TALK of a general election in Malaysia has taken a new turn since the recent arrest of leaders of the Indian-based movement Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf).

The feel-good factor that the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) so often depends on when calling an election is worryingly weak. The detention of five Hindraf leaders without trial is a shocking reminder that the country's government has not moved beyond the stage where it needs to resort to draconian measures to silence demonstrators.

Optimism is therefore not a widespread commodity at the moment. All this suggests that elections will be called later rather than sooner.

The fact that the government is expected to cut oil subsidies early next year will add to the gloom of the lower-income groups - factors implying that elections will be in the fifth year of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's mandate, and not the fourth.

An oil subsidy cut, judging from the protests that followed similar exercises last year, is bound to lead to unwanted street rallies. But the government's options are limited. It is under economic pressure to get the cut over with as soon as possible, and call elections later in the year.

This is a far cry from the upbeat mood around Prime Minister Abdullah during his eight-day campaign period in March 2004.

His staggering victory back then - when the coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) won 90.4 per cent of the parliamentary seats - was possible because of four main reasons.

First, the opposition could not possibly hold on to the unusually large margins it gained in 1999 in the aftermath of the melodramatic arrest and trial of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. The tide was therefore in the new Premier's favour.

Second, the fear of Islamic extremism in Malaysia following the Sept 11 attacks in the US put Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) at a disadvantage. The Islamic credentials of Datuk Seri Abdullah were a godsend for BN then. His advocacy of 'Islam Hadhari', or civilisational Islam, won the support of Malaysians worried about the rise of radical Islamism. The Premier, they all felt, was the one who would put a rein on the desecularisation of Malaysian society.

Third, by declaring that he was leading the battle against corruption, Datuk Seri Abdullah managed to deflect the strongest criticism that PAS and the opposition could fire at Umno.

And fourth, the Premier was a fresh face. Many voters warmed to him and felt it necessary to give him a chance. His slogans 'Work with me' and 'Support me to support you' went down well with a crowd tired of the authoritarian style of his predecessor.

Indeed, there were signs in the months following his triumph that 'Pak Lah', as he is affectionately called, meant what he said. He cut back on mega-projects, allowed the Anti-Corruption Agency to go after certain individuals, started a commission to look into police reform and allowed the release of Datuk Anwar Ibrahim from jail.

But where systemic reforms are concerned, Datuk Seri Abdullah may have waited too long. Four years is a long time, and top-down reforms cannot be put on hold for that long without being shelved. Any sincere ambition to reform the administration that he may have had has now become blurred by the ease of office and the realities of Malaysian politics.

For the next general election, the four factors that eased his victory in 2004 are no longer effective. The Abdullah factor is worn, the fight against graft appears to have been lost, fear of Islamisation has not eased and the tide is turning against the coalition.

In what seems to be an act born of insecurity, the government passed a constitutional amendment on Dec 11 to retain just one man - Tan Sri Rashid Abdul Rahman - for one more year in his critical position as chairman of the Election Commission.

Another sorry example of what delayed reform can do to a sincere wish for change was the sudden tabling of the Special Complaints Commission (SCC) Bill at the end of the 2007 parliamentary session. But widespread protest meant the Bill was not pushed through and its second reading has now been postponed to March next year.

A more damning criticism of the SCC was that it aimed to create a watered-down version of the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission suggested two years

ago by the Police Royal Commission, set up by Datuk Seri Abdullah himself after the 2004 elections.

Reforms usually meet harsh institutional resistance because they tend to challenge entrenched interests and seek to change old habits. Thus, for reforms to succeed, they must be carried through quickly, in a sustained manner and by committed followers of the reformist leader.

All these conditions have been lacking in the case of the Abdullah administration. Its only achievements are minor changes seen by the public as window-dressing and spin. The status quo, in the meantime, is further reinforced.

A new regime has become a not-so-new regime, and a reform agenda has become a programme of conservatism.

The imminent question one has to ask a purportedly reformist government that has waited too long is whether it was ever a reformist government to start with.

The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He is the author of *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail And His Time* (ISEAS 2006).