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Abstract	It is puzzling for some why Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who won a landslide general election in 2004, is calling a snap election on March 8 this year, a whole year ahead of the mandatory five years. Much of the reasoning revolves around two factors; the economy and Anwar Ibrahim.

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The 12th Malaysian General Elections: Seeking a Fresh Mandate

Saravanamuttu



It is puzzling for some Malaysian Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who won a landslide general election in 2004, is calling a snap election on March 8 this year, a whole year ahead of the mandatory five years. Much of the reasoning revolves around two factors; the economy and former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim.

The economic situation is bound to deteriorate, with the American economy likely to go into recession with its knock-on effects on Malaysia. The US is still Malaysia's single largest trading partner with about 19 percent of overall trade. Even without this happening, petrol, diesel and kerosene prices are due for a hike and the inflation rate has been climbing steadily to about 4 percent. To make matters worse, sometime in January of this year, the government resorted to a rationing of cooking oil because of acute shortages. This policy was quickly revoked after a public outcry.

There is of course the Anwar factor. Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy premier, now de facto leader of the oppositional People's Justice Party (PKR) has complained that the government and electoral commission had denied him the right to stand by calling for a March election. He would be eligible to stand in mid-April, five years after his release from jail, on charges for which he has been fully cleared. It is entirely credible that the Abdullah Badawi government worries that an elected Anwar as a member of parliament could be a veritable thorn in his side. Of course nothing stops Anwar from campaigning in this election and at an appropriate time, contest in a by-election, which would however require the resignation of a winning opposition candidate. Already there had been suggestions that he may do just that if the PKR candidate wins in the Balik Pulau constituency of Penang.

However, the above two factors may not explain a plethora of reasons why a general election needed to be called. Abdullah himself admitted in a CNN interview that he needed a fresh mandate because of a whole host of new issues, and more time to complete his anti-corruption agenda.

Be that as it may, he surely would have preferred that the outbursts of street protests late last year did not occur before his dissolution of Parliament. The "Bersih" coalition of political parties and NGOs calling for clean elections on November 10 reportedly saw 40,000 people taking to the streets, and the HINDRAF rally of some 30,000 Indians coming close on its heels on November 25, 2007. Abdullah took the heavy-handed action of detaining five HINDRAF leaders under the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), which he did not appear to relish.

Could it be that the prime minister just about lost his gumption? Could he afford more street rallies or new issues denting his 'moderate' image any further, or worse, give more time for a more formidable Opposition to gather steam? It is undeniable that a host of issues have peppered Abdullah's short first term. Some of these are truly remarkably in exposing the mendacity, incompetence and corruption of the government, its leaders, political cronies and institutions in years past.

Amongst the most recent spectacular revelations are those related the judiciary. The infamous V.K. Lingam video recording impelled Abdullah himself to call for a Royal Commission to ascertain the extent of judge-fixing and case-fixing by the eponymous lawyer named in the recording. The latest hearings reveal the alleged writing of judgments by a defence lawyer for the presiding judge! Mind you, many of the issues that have surfaced hark back to the Mahathir era but Pak Lah, as Abdullah is affectionately referred to by many Malaysians, was after all Mahathir's cabinet member, deputy premier and anointed successor even though the elder man has nothing but vitriol for his successor now.

More than ever before, as the prime minister himself points out, the current government needs a fresh mandate. There could even be a mundane factor which has caused the calling of this general election. Let's call this the new blood/generational shift factor. Many untested, younger UMNO and Barisan National politicians are anxiously waiting in the wings to rise in the hierarchy and seek their baptism of fire.

Among them is Abdullah's son-in-law, the fast-rising and fast-talking Khairy Jamaluddin, as well as the son of a receding Gerakan Party leader. There is also the need to get rid the a coalition partner, the Malaysian Chinese Association's (MCA) so-called "Team A" members although one of them, a former health minister has been conveniently disqualified by self-exposure, through a widely DVD of his sexual exploits, leading to his resignation. Then, in the tiny Northern state of Perlis, two ministers are apparently on the chopping block. There could be more of these deadwood reduction exercises such as that within the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), another coalition partner, in its desperate attempt to retain the Indian vote.

All in all one can expect an exciting 12th General Election. However, don't hold your breath too long - not since that fateful year of 1969 has the ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament. Perhaps losing a state or two may be something more plausible and realistic. The Malaysian electoral process has an endemic bias that favours incumbency. For all its flaws, the ruling coalition is still the largest political entity of multi-ethnic forces bringing together disparate parties from both Peninsular and East Malaysia.

The opposition parties have no such mechanism or platform, worse the three major opposition parties of PKR, DAP and PAS have palpable ideological differences and have yet to come round fully to craft a pact (as in the 1999 election) for one-on-one contests with the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition. This said, a significant migration of Indian and Chinese voters to the opposition, with PAS holding its Malay-Muslim ground, could augur for some interesting and unexpected opposition gains.

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