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Malaysia's GE timing: What's at stake?

By Ariel Tan

SYNOPSIS

Malaysia's GE is only due in September 2023. However, there have been pressures on PM Ismail Sabri Yaakob to hold an early GE, which will allow UMNO President Zahid Hamidi to exercise greater control over the party both before and after the election.

COMMENTARY

United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has declared that parliament should be dissolved soon for the General Election (GE) to be held this year. Election is only due in September 2023. Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob would have to obtain the King's consent to proceed. This remains uncertain, and the stakes are high.

Background

Previously, announcing snap polls was a no-fuss move by the PM, who was leader of UMNO and the Barisan Nasional (BN) government. However, the current government includes other parties and Ismail is No. 3 in UMNO, one of its three Vice Presidents. UMNO President Zahid Hamidi and former PM Najib Razak have pressed for an early GE since 2020, touting to party grassroots that UMNO would regain more seats and dominate the new government.

Ismail has been hesitant. Some internal estimates suggest that UMNO might not win outright, and he has [warned](#) of a hung parliament, which would require UMNO/BN to compromise with other parties to form the next government, as is the current situation. And Ismail may not be re-appointed as PM.

Members of the cabinet, the Opposition, and civil society have objected to an early

GE. The public appears apathetic if not cynical; turnout at the Johor state election in March was a low 55%.

Calling GE now will distract from preparations for potentially devastating floods from mid-November to March. More importantly, it could delay for months parliament's passing of Budget 2023, which is critical for international confidence in Malaysia's political situation and fiscal position, and its continued recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, with Malaysian businesses and middle- and lower-income households hoping for government relief.

The King is expected to act within his constitutional remit; he would want to be seen to be above partisan politics, while considering public interest and his declared support for political stability and rule of law.

Expectations on GE Results

Whether the GE is held now or a few months later is unlikely to significantly affect support levels for each party. UMNO will likely improve on its seat count from 2018 and emerge as the largest party, even if its coalition does not win outright.

The Opposition is fragmented. Pakatan Harapan (PH) is unlikely to gain enough Malay support and may have trouble turning out its supporters who are disillusioned with its performance in government (2018-2020) and politics in general.

BN currently holds 42 seats while its traditional Sarawakian partner, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), holds 19. It depends on the support of rival Malay party Bersatu (29), Islamic party Parti Islam se-Malaysia, PAS (17), and others to maintain its [117/222](#) majority in parliament.

Post-GE, even a hung parliament could see BN and GPS winning around 100 seats. BN would then require at least the support of PAS, if not the other parties, which may also seek to form their own ruling coalition.

The Stakes

The GE timing, however, could determine who will lead the party and country if UMNO wins. It could shape UMNO's approach in the near term on key governance issues including on corruption, rule of law, and political and economic reforms.

A GE in the coming weeks will allow UMNO President Zahid to strengthen his control over the party, particularly after his recent acquittal of 40 corruption charges. (The AGC has appealed against the acquittal, and he has an ongoing court case for 47 graft charges.) If Zahid runs in the GE, he will be a contender for PM.

Zahid has [claimed](#) selective prosecution and urged party members to press for a royal pardon for Najib. He had demanded investigations of Tommy Thomas, the former Attorney-General under the PH government, which had brought multiple graft charges against Zahid, Najib, and others. A triumphant new UMNO/BN government under Zahid's control can be expected to review the graft cases against Zahid, Najib and their allies.

A GE closer to September 2023 could see Zahid's possible exoneration or conviction for graft. If the latter, it opens the door for PM Ismail and UMNO Deputy President Mohamad Hasan to lead the party into the GE. They have accepted the court's rulings on Najib.

Any UMNO-led government can be expected to be circumspect on the graft charges brought against UMNO politicians and their families by the previous PH government. The difference is the degree to which it might be seen to countenance or disavow money politics and allow for institutional reforms.

UMNO's Trajectory

UMNO leaders like party Youth Chief Dr Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki and other youth leaders down the line are seen as more moderate and inclusive towards other races. They are well-educated and understand the need for an efficient technocratic government and open economy that can attract international investors. Some like UMNO Youth Exco Bastien Onn have noted that integrity is important for the public and that UMNO had to "[move on](#)" from Najib despite members' strong sympathies.

This is not to say that they are prepared to give up on Malay interests or that new corruption cases would not emerge. Warlordism and money politics as represented by Zahid and Najib will not go away. It is that some of the party's leaders are more vested in catering to the aspirations of younger Malaysians, and ensuring that UMNO thrives in the medium term. Failure to improve governance and deliver economic progress would necessitate the party falling back solely on the race and religion cards.

While policy formulation and implementation have largely been left to Malaysia's public service, the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing serious environmental, economic, and global geopolitical challenges have highlighted the need for competent political leadership.

Challenges have become too complex for stovepipe bureaucracy to manage. Countries like Indonesia and Vietnam are taking the shine off Malaysia in attracting investments. That Khairy Jamaluddin's performance in the pandemic has won public praise would not have been lost on the party. While generally unwelcoming of "parachute candidates", UMNO is reportedly considering to field former banker and current finance minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz in the coming GE.

UMNO has fielded younger candidates in recent elections. However, these candidates are not necessarily identified with a forward-looking programme beyond traditional developmental economics and welfare.

According to a 2022 Merdeka Center [poll](#) of Muslim youth, they strongly support democracy and moderately support freedom, equality, and diversity. Their top three concerns were employment, environment protection and corruption; their top three priorities were good education, good infrastructure, and safe living environment.

A more recent survey by The Star/Sinar Harian/Sin Chew/Astro/Tamil Nanban and three research centres found that Malay voters wanted a stable Malay-led government that protects the constitutional monarchy and leads all races in a harmonious power-

sharing arrangement. They want an independent judiciary and a government that demonstrates integrity, innovation, and efficiency in tackling priorities like good jobs, inflation, and corruption.

UMNO is a conservative party, but given that it has led the national government for decades, delivering broad economic progress and inclusion has always been part of its mission. Thus, UMNO had more often than not elected reformists (at least at the start of their term) for party president – Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah Badawi, and Najib Razak.

Zahid was an exception, a conservative backslapping warlord popular among the grassroots. He had obtained fewer votes in the 2018 presidency race than the two other reformist contenders combined viz. Khairy Jamaluddin and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (42% vs 57%). Recent party elections in Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) have allowed for some leadership renewal; in UMNO's case, elections have been delayed for more than a year.

Ismail Sabri the Unlikely PM

By leveraging the power of incumbency and cultivating support from the Opposition based on common interests, Ismail has outlasted all expectations.

While he is often depicted as pitting against Zahid and Najib, Ismail could not have survived without the tacit acceptance of other UMNO leaders in the Supreme Council and beyond. They know that UMNO had lost power in 2018 with Najib at the helm. They may want to avoid going into the next election rallying for the cause of exonerating Najib and Zahid.

For UMNO members, there is nothing more important than getting back to power. This may not require a full repudiation of the Zahid-Najib brand in the coming GE, but promising good forward-looking governance would be necessary for UMNO's longer term challenge of winning over young, middle class, independent, educated, and urban Malays.

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