In guessing election date, we plan to fail By Wong Chin Huat / The Star / Sunday, 24 Jul 2022

https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2022/07/24/in-guessing-electiondate-we-plan-to-fail

"IF you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

To avoid such failure, the human race developed calendars and clocks so that the future can be broken into years, seasons, months, weeks and days, hours, minutes and seconds. We limit uncertainty by planning our planting and harvest, our consumption, savings and investments.

You could even say that civilisation is a process of minimising uncertainties. That is even true of political life: leaders no longer serve till their last breath. They now have contract jobs.

So could you tell me: Why do we have to guess the date of the 15th General Election (GE15)?

Why can't police and teachers plan their family holidays ahead knowing when they will be busy over the elections?

Why can't investors and fund managers plan their portfolios knowing when elections will be called?

Most importantly, why can't ministers plan their work in governing their country knowing when they will have to defend their seats?

Look at other countries where election dates are predictable. In the United States, since 1845, the presidential election always falls on the first or second Tuesday of November.

In 2007, Canada passed a law that requires general elections to be held on "the third Monday in October" every four years, and this has been true in two out of five elections since. All its provinces and territories have similar provisions.

Fixed election dates are natural for presidential countries like the United States because the president and the lawmakers are separately elected and both are meant to serve full terms. However, with some flexibility it is possible in parliamentary countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, New Zealand, and in Malaysia too.

First, early elections must be made possible when the government loses its parliamentary majority. This is necessary if an ousted government believes that it currently enjoys popular support while the Parliament that ousted it has an outdated mandate.

Second, for whatever reason, if a supermajority, say two-thirds, in Parliament believes that they should have a new mandate or the voters should be given the chance to make their new choice, then Parliament must be allowed to seek early dissolution.

Why, in this idea of a full or fixed term Parliament, can only a supermajority -- but not a simple majority government -- seek an early dissolution?

If a government can shorten its lifespan to win a snap election, it is detrimental to the Opposition, which cannot choose the timing of the race. More importantly, this convenience would also incentivise governments to think short-term and make populist promises that may not be sustainable. The ultimate losers would then be the economy and society.

Now, in the Malaysian context, the royal power to reject an early election need not be affected. The idea is only to make early dissolution difficult, impossible without overwhelming support from the House. In the opposite scenario, the King could still withhold his assent even if

two-thirds of MPs back the prime minister in seeking dissolution.

Notably, curbing the unpredictability of the election calendar can be done even without Constitutional or legal requirements.

The German Bundestag is only expected to serve 36 to 48 months but all eight elections after the end of the Cold War (in the 1990s) have been held in the second half of September. Like wise, New Zealand's general elections since 2005 have always been held within the months of September to November at a three-year interval.

How do countries like Germany and New Zealand get a regular or predictable electoral calendar without legally imposing it?

It is in their political culture. _Their political elites do not see elections as casinos. They do not bet on a good time. When in government, they don't hope to ambush the Opposition by calling a surprise election. Even when losing popularity, they finish their term because that is their duty.

This is possible because their citizens do not look at politics as pure Machiavellian games and laugh when, actually, they themselves are the sacrifice on the political altar.

Those citizens expect governments to govern, not play gimmicks. They won't tolerate nonsense like "waiting for inspiration for a snap poll" or "going into an election with an undebated budget".

It is time for Malaysians to reject sophistry like "we need an early election to produce a strong government". Who can guarantee an early election would not produce a hung Parliament if half of Malaysia is covered by water in November?

Should we have another election if no party again wins a simple majority? If we can then deal with another hung Parliament, why can't we deal with it now?

Incidentally, post-Cold War Germany and New Zealand, from 1996 to 2000, always had hung Parliaments. But this has not stopped Germany from becoming Europe's strongest economy or New Zealand from having one of the world's best management of Covid-19.

For all their loud noises, those who want an early election may not have the power to enforce it. If Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaacob does not want to seek an early dissolution, can his party afford to sack him?

We are most likely to see the speculated election date being postponed from September to November, then to next March, and maybe next May, June, July or even August.

With such looming uncertainty, nobody can really plan for the months to come. Not police or teachers. Not investors and fund managers. Most importantly, not ministers when we need them to manage the 3Es -- economy, endemics and environment -- Crisis.

So Malaysians, why must we continue to plan to fail?

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