

RACE, POLITICS and MODERATION

A Study of the Malaysian Electoral Process

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Community wisdom in tomorrow's election is that the ruling National Front will form the next government with only its majority in doubt.

The consensus is that the DAP will retain all the nine seats it won in 1974. The question is how many more it will add to its cap.

The pattern of voting in past elections has been relatively stable — with most of the major towns and cities falling to the opposition and the ruling coalition headed by Umno winning most of the predominantly Malay rural constituencies. The only change since 1969 was the rejection of PAS in Kelantan.

Whatever the gains or losses of the Front or its two main opponents — the DAP and PAS — the polling tomorrow is expected to fall into this predictable pattern.

Veteran observers have detected a slight return to the 1969 period when the combined opposition of PAS, DAP and other parties made considerable inroads into Front territories after vigorous campaigning.

The ban on public rallies has not made the 17 days of campaigning any less intense, except that there is less public discussion on main issues.

Most, if not all, of the 12 parliamentary constituencies there, are expected to fall again to the Front.

The Front has avoided making extravagant promises. Instead, it has campaigned on the sim-

ple theme of peace, ability and prosperity under the impartial and firm leadership of Datuk Hussein Onn.

The two main points in its stand are wiping out poverty in both rural and urban areas and restructuring society to uplift Bumiputras — in other words, a little for every community.

The emphasis on social

justice will be gradually taken away under the new economic policy.

At national level, it has harped on alleged corruption, governmental inefficiency, widespread unemployment, poor services in urban areas and lack of low-cost housing, including the thorny squatter issue.

Its campaign is aimed

and values of Islam.

The Front's answer is simply that it is equally committed to spiritualism, and the material concept—hence governmental announcements on intending development projects and the decision to study how the price of padi can be raised, increasing the cost of rice.

Apart from this, its strategy during the campaigning, either in che-ramah or through political advertisements, is to hit out at PAS for dividing the Malay votes through its collaboration with the DAP.

For the non-Malay Front candidates, the message to the electorate is that they can do more for the community than the DAP which, it claims, only makes ineffective noise.

And, as if to prove their integrity, many have distributed leaflets listing their achievements in fighting the wrongs of petty bureaucrats and the benefits they have secured for the Chinese in their respective constituencies.

Mohammad even went to the extent of admitting that it was possible for the ruling party to win fewer seats.

Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah was even less optimistic. A few days ago, he said the Front would, at the minimum, win 100 seats.

Discounting his prediction of 39 seats from Sabah and Sarawak, that means only 61 from Peninsular Malaysia. Compared to the 90 seats captured in 1974, this



justice, rule of law and Datuk Hussein's leadership is obviously designed to sway voters away from opposition exploitation of communal grievances.

As expected, DAP candidates have played on the dissatisfaction of the non-Malays over lack of educational opportunities and the fears that their share of the econo-

mic cake will be gradually taken away under the new economic policy.

On the other hand, PAS has been beating the familiar religious theme. With support from young activists, its candidates have been fishing for votes on the basis of the need to restructure society according to the principles

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1 The Political Framework

The framework of politics in Malaysia has been based on race ever since the first nationwide elections were conducted under British rule in 1955. Independence two years later and five subsequent general elections spanning a period of more than two decades have not changed the basic structure. Race remains the constant and dominating factor. Most of the political parties are organized along ethnic lines. They mobilize communal support for essentially communal oriented programmes. The rest, though multiracial in structure, are in practice communally oriented and dependent largely on the support of a single community.

The lineup for the fifth general elections since Independence, on 8 July 1978, was in broad outlines identical to those of previous polls except for the leadership changes, the appearance of a host of new political parties registered over the last few years and the dissolution of a few of the older ones. As in past elections, the choice before the electorate was between the ruling group consisting of a number of communal parties allied in a multiracial framework known as the Barisan Nasional (Barisan) and an array of smaller parties, some more communally extremist, and some multiracial in name only. And, as in the past, there were numerous Independent candidates.

The Barisan Set-up

In Peninsular Malaysia, the Barisan is made up of six components: the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) and the People's Progressive Party (PPP). The last two are multiracial on paper, but their leadership and support come from the non-Malay segment of the population. In the Opposition are the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP), the theocratic Partai Islam (PAS), Social Justice Party (Pekemas), Partai Socialis Rakyat Malaya (PSRM), a party led by left-leaning Malay intellectuals, Kaum Insaf Tanah Ayer (KITA), Social Democratic Party (SDP), Worker's Party (W) and the United People's Party (UPP). Except for the DAP, PAS and the ideological PSRM, the rest are insignificant fly-by-night parties or, as in the case of Pekemas, a one-man party led by Dr Tan Chee Khoo who retired from active politics because of ill health just before the elections.