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Case for changes to system of government

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THE recent parliamentary elections held in Britain, France and Canada have given rise to some thought-provoking constitutional issues. Such issues are of interest to us because our system of government is more or less similar to these countries.

Of particular significance is whether we should continue to retain our present system without any modification as we enter the 21st Century.

In Britain, the Conservative Party had been continuous power for 18 years. The elections was held at the end of a full five-year term. The economy was in good shape and the unemployment rate had been much reduced. Yet the opposition Labour Party won the election with a landslide victory. It would seem that economic achievement alone is not good enough to ensure an incumbent government to be returned to power.

In France, the president is elected for a term of seven years. After nearly two years in office, President Jacques Chirac called for a snap election to consolidate his Conservative party majority in Parliament for the remaining five years of his presidency. Chirac was formerly a conservative Prime Minister under a Socialist President (Francois Mitterrand) and did not want to repeat the difficult experience he had between the PM and the President.

In the polls, the people voted in the Socialists. Chirac's party lost half the seats it held in the previous parliament. So instead of strengthening his power, Chirac walked into a situation which he was most anxious to avoid by calling for mid-term polls.

In Canada, Prime Minister Jean Chretien also called for a snap poll. His party ended up with a much reduced majority and nearly lost power. Voting was on provincial issues overriding national interests.

The results of these three elections show that it makes no difference to the outcome in their unpredictability whether the election is held at the end of the full five-year term or in mid-term.

It follows that the power given to the Government to call for early elections to suit its political agenda to retain power is not justified and may even lead to a mockery of the system.

The possibility of elections in mid-term creates uncertainty in the stability of the Government which invariably affects the economy of the country. Another factor is that with too frequent elections, politicians spend more time and effort in politicking to retain power at the expense of orderly and predictable government.

Elections are a very expensive exercise costing the tax-payer millions of ringgit and also a strain in on the financial resources of political parties participating in the elections.

It would seem to follow that fixed terms and elections times are more appropriate to good governance. Once elected, legislators should serve the full five-year term and thus fulfil the mandate given by the people.

This could be effected by providing in the Constitution that general Federal and State elections shall be held once every five years in the year divisible by five beginning with the year 2000. It should also provide that the elections be held in the month of June with MPs and State Assemblymen taking office on July 1 and to hold office until June 30 of the election year. Constitutionally, this means the Dewan Rakyat and State Legislatures are permanent institutions and not subject to dissolution.

It does not follow that the Government cannot be changed in mid-terms

should occasion arise. This can be achieved by a vote of no confidence in the Government at any sitting of the Dewan Rakyat or State Legislative Assembly. It can also be done by the party in power by changing its leader and thereby the Prime Minister or Chief Minister.

In Britain, the parliamentary party does this on annual basis. This was how Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher lost her job because the party felt it needed a change in leadership to win the next election. In Japan, the party elects its leader every two years and Parliament is called upon to vote for or against the elected leader as Prime Minister.

In Malaysia, too, we have changed Prime Ministers in mid-term. The first occasion was when Tun Abdul Razak became PM following the resignation of Tunku Abdul Rahman. Tun Hussien Onn, in turn, became the PM after the death of Tun Abdul Razak.

And Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad became PM after resignation of Tun Hussein Onn. And so it was in Kedah, Selangor and Malacca recently. All these changes were effected without a general election.

Finally, it is about time we abolish the system of permitting independent candidates to stand at any Federal or State election. In a multi-party system such as ours, there should be no place for independent candidates because independent MPs or State Assemblymen will never be able to form a government.

The law should, therefore, provide that only candidates nominated by a political party registered with the Election Commission are qualified to stand for election.

Times change, people change. So should the system of government.

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