

17/12/1998

Credibility vital to retain public confidence

Harun Hashim

CREDIBILITY of the government leads to public confidence. The Special Functions Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin said as much in Hong Kong recently when he spoke of the Government's positive measures to restore investor confidence in turning around the economy.

During the regime of President Suharto, there were only three political parties in Indonesia. Following the aftermath of the May 13 riots and the resignation of Suharto, President B.J. Habibie promised several reforms, one of which was the reform of the political system. As a result, 100 political parties have been formed.

In announcing that general elections will be held in Indonesia on June 9 next year, the Government said that only eight political parties qualify to participate in the elections.

The Indonesian minister's statement of the pre-qualification has given rise to credibility gap of the governments's promises of political reform.

Perhaps the timing of the pre-qualification statement was unfortunate. To qualify to contest a political party must have membership support in more than half of Indonesia's 27 provinces or more than one million signatures. In a country with a population of more than 200 million one million represents only half a per cent.

In many countries, the cut-off for a political party to enter parliament is five per cent of the votes cast.

The system is to allow all political parties to participate and to disqualify any party with less than five per cent of the votes for lack of credible support.

If the pre-qualification had been announced earlier perhaps there would not be 100 new political parties. In any event, if all 100 political parties are allowed to participate the ballot paper would be a very long one indeed!

The Indonesian Government could have saved itself the unwelcome questioning of its credibility if it had established an independent Election Commission not only to conduct the elections but also the exclusive power to register political parties desirous of contesting the elections.

Having said that we have to look at ourselves. Recently Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad suggested that the reformasi movement should register as a political party to contest the forthcoming general election.

When asked if such a party would be registered he replied that there would be no obstacles. The question should not have been asked in first place because it reflects on the credibility of the Government.

The point is that it is within the power of the Executive branch of the Government to decide on the fate of political parties.

To be legal, political parties have to be registered with the Registrar of Societies under the Societies Act of 1966. The registry is a department of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

True, several political parties are in existence in Malaysia today. There is also no limit as to their number and they can all participate in elections.

The danger is that when an application to register is delayed or refused or when a registered political party has not complied with the law leading to legal action for deregistration or even criminal prosecution, the

Government is accused of suppressing political opposition or worse, that it is violating human rights.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of association albeit subject to compliance with the law. In the context of our social development, some form of regulation is obviously necessary otherwise all sorts of organisations will come into existence with criminal objectives as the real purpose.

The Constitution has also established an independent Elections Commission. For more than 40 years the Commission has conducted free and fair elections.

As political parties are formed to participate in elections, it would seem obvious that political parties would be registered and operate under the supervision of the Commission.

If the existing powers of the Home Affairs Minister in respect of political parties is vested in the Commission, the Government would insulate itself from allegations of abuse of power however unjustified the allegations may have been.

Parliament could make all the necessary provisions with regard to registration, management and accountability of political parties to be administered by the Commission independent of any interference and responsibility of the Executive branch of the Government.

Credibility is the most valued reputation of any government to win and retain public confidence. The Government should therefore, as far possible, strive to insulate itself from public scepticism.

(END)