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Be rational and vote wisely at the polls

Din Merican

MALAYSIANS will bid for 193 parliamentary seats and 394 positions in the state assemblies on Nov 29, polling day. Our country has, as stated in the Nov 14 "Other Thots" column, "the distinction of holding the general election without fail every four to five years since we became independent in 1957. This is the 10th." I also agree with the writer that "...our democracy, as enshrined in the Constitution, is not only alive but has brought stability and economic progress to our multi-racial and multi-religious society, except for a brief period in 1969."

This is a tribute to all of us. We have done so without UN supervision, foreign observers and financial assistance from the United States, the European Union and Australia.

Our elections are free so that we can vote with our conscience, devoid of any pressure. Over 42 years, we have behaved as responsible citizens at the election rallies and the polling booths, and we have voted in an atmosphere of peace and goodwill.

More importantly, we voted wisely. We have consistently chosen the Alliance/Barisan Nasional party, ably led by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Tun Razak, Tun Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and have given them strong mandates to govern.

We enjoyed the dividends in terms of peace and stability, and prosperity. Will we do it again this time around? I am inclined to say "Yes", with the proviso that we use our head and act on the basis of the track records of the various political parties and the quality of candidates. We have to choose candidates who can serve our country and our interest. This is the rational and proper thing to do.

To the young men and women of the Malaysian Net-Generation who are eligible to vote, prove that Justice Harun Hashim is right when he wrote recently, and I quote him, that "(t)oday's voter is literate, better educated than his forefathers and capable of making his own decision on what party or candidate to vote for." I hope Justice Harun is right. I have faith in you. You have, however, given me some cause for concern.

I have seen signs in the last 18 months that are unhealthy for the future of our great country. I have witnessed total disrespect for our chosen leaders, the protests on our streets, the use of foul language, misinformation on the Internet, the use of religion for political ends, and the abuse of democratic rights in general.

Sometime last year, I was invited to participate in a private forum at the University of Malaya together with Dr Chandra Muzaffar and Rastam A. Sani, and was booed for presenting a dissenting view on the state of Malaysian politics. I was not given a chance to finish what I had to say.

This is unfortunate. If this is progress and if this the way we are moving in the next millennium, we are heading in the wrong direction. We are just aping the West in the name of democracy and human rights.

We have taken too many things for granted. We seem to have forgotten the blood, sweat and toil of our leaders, and forebears. The struggles they went through during the period of British colonialism, the Japanese occupation, the communist insurgency (1948-1960), the Indonesian confrontation (1963-1965), the 1969 racial unrest, and the many challenges of nation building and the trials and tribulations we experienced in recent decades, now being recounted in the New Straits Times, should remind us that it is not easy to build a nation.

It takes Greg Sheridan, a foreigner, to recognise one of our country's greatest achievements. In his latest book, *Asian Values, Western Dreams*, he said that "...through good times and bad, through the oil shock of the 1970s, the recession of the mid-1980s, the political upheaval of the late 80s, the rapid social change associated with the boom years of fast economic growth during most of the 90s and then the most recent savage regional economic downturn of the late 90s, Malaysians have kept the racial calm. Peace among the races, an accommodation at least if not a profound harmony, has been secured."

Strong and dedicated leadership, and good Government are needed to ensure that we continue to live in peace and stability, and build a tolerant, competitive and resilient nation using our cultural diversity and racial mixture.

It is not politics and rhetoric. It is not luck, but it is by design and lots of sweat that we have been able to secure racial harmony. Do we wish to fritter this away, and undermine the very foundation of our society by engaging religious bigotry, and communal issues or raising matters enshrined in the Constitution?

Not for me. For me, it is about realising Vision 2020. The stakes are high, and so are the rewards.

Sheridan puts this succinctly. "If Malaysia succeeds in becoming a fully developed nation," he says, "it will not only demonstrate the viability of multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies but may offer a new vision of how an Islamic society can reconcile Islam and economic modernisation.

The exciting aspect of Mahathir's endeavours is that he tried to use Islam as a constructive force for modernisation, rather than succumbing to the Western stereotype of Islam as a force for feudalism or at least antique Arab chauvinism."

Whenever we talk of Malaysia, the name "Mahathir" is unavoidably identified with it. Although Dr Mahathir says the upcoming general elections is not a test of his popularity or contest between him and another or others in the opposition, and I agree, it is difficult to separate the man from his country. He is the epicentre of Malaysian modernisation (and his achievements are too numerous to enumerate).

Dr Mahathir has shown by his personal example, sterling service, policies and actions what is possible for our country. He has opened our minds. He has restored our faith in ourselves, and helped us to remove the colonial baggage, that is, we are somehow inferior to the Mat Salleh.

Our conquest of Mount Everest and the North Pole, Datuk Azhar Mansur's conquest of the seven seas, and our successful staging of the 16th Commonwealth Games are mere external manifestations of the promise and the possibilities for the future when we, as a nation, have a positive mental attitude.

Even TIME magazine (Nov 22) grudgingly acknowledge that Dr Mahathir "is widely admired for fostering racial harmony and economic development during his 18 years as Prime Minister." This fact we cannot ignore when we elect the next Government.

I know what I want for our country. I want a Government that has a strong mandate to govern and take us into the 21st century. Don't you?

* The writer, a Malaysian, is a senior research fellow of the Phnom Penh-based Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and also an analyst. The views expressed here do not in any way implicate the Institute.

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