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Election-Murray

BN MAY RETAIN TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY IN THE GENERAL ELECTION, SAYS MURRAY

By: Salmly Hashim

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 (Bernama) -- The National Justice Party (Keadilan) may grab five to six parliamentary seats in the Nov 29 general election, but the so-called Alternative Front that includes PAS, DAP and PRM may not be strong enough to chip away at the Barisan Nasional's two-thirds majority.

This was predicted by the new Washington bureau chief of the Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), Murray Hiebert, here Wednesday.

"People are angry and there is a lot of sympathy for the opposition...but (the Alternative Front) remain untested and voters are not sure if they can hold it together," said Hiebert who was imprisoned in Malaysia for 30 days on contempt charges stemming from an article he wrote about defamation lawsuits in Malaysia which appeared in the FEER.

The Malays "are not mad at the party, but only one man. They'll probably vote Umno," he contended.

At a luncheon organised by the Freedom Forum, Murray, who was released on Oct 11, said the recovering economy was helping the BN and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is still viewed as "the architect of tremendous economic growth".

In an interview with TV3, Dr Mahathir expressed confidence that the BN will again win a two-thirds majority with more than 128 parliamentary seats in the upcoming 10th general election.

A total of 193 parliamentary and 394 state seats will be contested.

Hiebert said he did not expect Keadilan, "which is spread very thin on the ground," to disappear after the general election because "they're in this for the long haul. If they get five to six seats, they've done well".

He noted that Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who leads Keadilan, initially appeared "nervous and inarticulate," but "she has become more articulate the last time I interviewed her".

As for Anwar, Hiebert said that it would be very difficult for the former deputy prime minister and finance minister to make a political comeback as he would be in his 60s if he had to serve out his sentences for corruption and possibly sodomy.

"It would be very difficult for him to make a comeback but not impossible ...unless the opposition wins and gets the King (Yang di-Pertuan Agong) to pardon him," said Hiebert.

Anwar, who was sacked on Sept 2, last year was later arrested and tried on corruption charges and sentenced to six years in jail. He is currently on trial for sodomy.

Hiebert, who would like to revisit Malaysia some day, also gave a vivid account of his brief stay in prison which he found "shocking" after realising that he had lost his freedom, his privacy and his name.

"At Sungai Buloh (Prison) I was just BSB1366/99HL...it was dehumanising," he said.

Later, when asked in a television studio recording called "Inside Media" at Newseum, if he had a fair trial in Malaysia, Hiebert said anybody who had been through a trial would not say that they had a fair trial, but he added, if he had to go through it again, he would like to stand trial in an American court and be sent to a Malaysian prison to serve out his sentence.

He said that he was well treated by other prisoners and prison guards

in Malaysia whom he believed to be mostly sympathetic to Anwar and his cause.

He said that he would probably have been abused in the more violent American prison systems.

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