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Dr M and company still way ahead

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TWO days after the nominations, all signs indicate that voters appear to prefer Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his team over the Opposition nominees.

After even a cursory look at the list of candidates for the 10th General Elections, I also concur with what seems to me arguably the case.

Of course, there are several Opposition candidates whose academic credentials cannot be disputed but in politics, the lack of education is not a major handicap.

John Major is a good example and before him James Callaghan. But we also do recall what happened to Tun Salleh Abas in 1990 and Marina Yusof in 1995.

During the campaign, the shortest, I believe in the history of Malaysian elections, the electorate will get to know the real candidates and when they have the opportunity to compare them (besides their respective parties) they will choose BN and its candidates who appear in all respects way ahead.

BN has a good start when it won two seats uncontested - the Betong Parliamentary seat in Sarawak and the Tangkak State seat in Johor. The Prime Minister enjoys the most favourable ratings by far than any of the BN candidates.

His Pas opponent, Subky Latiff, a former Utusan Melayu journalist and a long-time Pas member, is a lightweight and has never won a fight in spite of being a candidate many times, and each time in a different constituency in various states.

Although every cloud has a silver lining, Kubang Pasu is an indestructable Umno fortress. Subky was sent to Kubang Pasu as if after a flip of a coin and he therefore cannot possibly be a serious challenger. The voters of Kubang Pasu can never forget that it is Dr Mahathir who turned their area from an isolated and deprived place into a thriving community with a university to boot.

Kubang Pasu is well known nationally and its township of Jitra is prosperous.

I visited Kubang Pasu, Jitra and Sintok last August (to give a talk at Universiti Utara Malaysia) and even during that one-day tour, I knew Dr Mahathir is as safe in Kubang Pasu as Tok Guru Nik Aziz is in his state constituency of Chempaka in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan.

Kubang Pasu is a BN stronghold, and Dr Mahathir's citadel since 1974. The voters are realists. They would not trade off Malaysia's most illustrious leader with a political nobody who lacks both qualifications and experience in Government.

It is good news that the Opposition, led by Dr Mahathir's bitter and virulent adversaries, has failed to get a credible opponent to fight him. The Prime Minister will win handsomely and I look forward to him with a fresh mandate after a rancorous and acrimonious year to make things better even for us.

None of the Opposition list of candidates (outside Kelantan) has previous experience in government whereas the BN candidates, many of whom have long years of experience in running the Government both at national and state level.

Indeed, the BN men and women are long in experience as well as qualifications.

The Opposition leader in prison, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, is barred from contesting because he was convicted for corruption in April. However his wife, Dr Wan Azizah Ismail, takes on her husband's one-time top advisor Dr Ibrahim Saad, in a straight fight in Anwar's home seat, Permatang Pauh, which is also Ibrahim's kampung where he was born and raised.

Whatever, Permatang Pauh not unsurprisingly has attracted more international media than any other constituencies.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the deputy Prime Minister, has played a credible role since his appointment last year, and appears well able to cope. He should win against Pas' Abdul Khalid Rashid, another political nonentity quite easily in his long-time home base of Kepala Batas.

Tun Daim Zainuddin, the architect of the hither to economic success, like Dr Mahathir and Badawi should be able to retain his seat without much difficulty.

He is a lucky man because the economic crisis, unlike in Indonesia, has played an indirect role in our country in that it has affected more the corporate sector than the population at large, least of all in the rural areas.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Umno's number three man and Tan Sri Khalil Yaacob, the party's secretary-general, Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein, the acting Umno Youth chief, and many other notable BN personalities such as Dr Ling Liong Sik, Dr Lim Keng Yaik, Datuk Seri Samy Vellu and Datuk Leo Moggie are not expected to face tough challenges.

On Monday, November 29, the people of Kelantan will have the chance to bring down the curtain to end Pas' rule. Whether they will exercise the option is another story. Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who with the assistance of Pas, annihilated Umno Kelantan in 1990, and again in 1995 stopped it from recapturing Kelantan, has been tasked by Dr Mahathir to wrest back Kelantan from his former ally.

The Prince is defending his Gua Musang seat which he first won in 1974. A decisive defeat of Pas in Kelantan is what Umno members and Dr Mahathir want. But a resolute Pas state government from all accounts is determined to deny Umno's wish.

While still on Kelantan, two of my former opponents, Yusof Noor (Pas) and Shukri Mohamed (Umno and formerly Semangat 46) and both lawyers are fighting each other in Machang Parliamentary constituency.

I defeated Yusof with a big majority in 1974 while Shukri beat me in Kok Lanas in the disastrous 1990 polls.

Lim Kit Siang, Karpal Singh and Syed Husin Ali (of Parti Rakyat Malaysia) are yesterday's men but like Fadzil Noor (President of Pas), Dr Wan Azizah Ismail and Dr Chandra Muzaffar, are clamouring for reform, though I do not know what reform.

As far as I know, Dr Mahathir has long emptied detention camps of "political prisoners" and has given press freedom (Harakah, Aliran, Eksklusif and other publications). It is perceived that all these publications, like the mainstream ones, somewhat suffer from a credibility problem.

In any event, in slightly more than a week's time the voters will decide what they want.

In the racially mixed Lembah Pantai Parliamentary constituency, primarily middle class, the outcome of the battle between two lawyers - incumbent Sharizat Jalil and Keadilan's legal advisor, Zainur Zakaria (former chairman of the Bar Council) will show future direction of politics among the Bumiputera middle and professional class in particular. As I expect Keadilan is focusing its main efforts in the Klang Valley, Federal Territory and Selangor besides Permatang Pauh. The latter to

ensure that Anwar's old seat passes on to his wife.

It is not an easy task for Wan Azizah given that her opponent Dr Ibrahim Saad is no pushover. Wan Azizah and Dr Ibrahim will be pushing each other until either falls on the ground.

It would be a scorched-earth struggle. The Klang Valley, the place of birth of Reformasi and where Al Gore not only endorsed but encouraged Anwar Ibrahim is a natural battle ground for Keadilan.

The 10th general elections could be the dirtiest and most violent in Malaysian history, but it could also be a clean and fair one. Absolutely no one wants a rerun of the May 13 1969 incident.

All signs thus far show it will be peaceful though far from being dull.

The BN, despite some weaknesses which are being taken care of (like curbing corruption, ensuring more transparency and checking undue corporate influence) is still the well-tested, remarkable and unique form of power sharing government machine best suited to multi-ethnic Malaysia. As long as Dr Mahathir remains at helm, BN will continue to be as astute as ever.

Dr Mahathir's Malaysia is a mixture of the rich past and the present while retaining each ethnic community's best features. The achievements are a testament of Dr Mahathir's firm leadership of the 14-party grand coalition and the various ethnic leaders' wisdom.

I anticipate the Chinese, at least a decent majority, will vote BN because their legitimate interest are better protected and upheld by a moderate Umno-led Barisan government than a Pas-dominated alternative government.

There is too much risks for them to gamble their future and that of their children and their children's children.

The anti-government sentiment aside it is unconceivable that BN will lose. In any event, the Opposition has never had a better opportunity than now in its attempt to reduce BN's two-thirds majority while simultaneously recognising that inter-racial harmony which guarantees the continuity of political stability is of utmost importance at this juncture of the national march towards creating a Bangsa Malaysia - One People, One Nation and One Objective.

A vote for continuity is a vote to better everyone's lot and a demonstration of strong support for a secular and well-tried government.

All being well, there will be a repeat, another triumph for BN.

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