

29/11/1999

Dr Mahathir confident Malaysians will vote wisely today

Lokman Mansor

MALAYSIANS go to the polls today to elect a Government that will lead the nation into the new millennium.

At 8am (7.30am in Sabah and Sarawak) 17,772 polling stations will open for 9.6 million eligible Malaysians to cast their votes.

And some time after midnight, the Government for the next five years would have been in place.

This is the 10th general election in Malaysia's history. The first was held in 1955, two years before Independence, to form the Federal Legislative Council. Subsequent elections were held in 1959, 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990 and 1995.

For the first time, polling will be held for only one day. Previously more than a day was necessary to cater to voters in remote areas in Sabah and Sarawak. The Election Commission said the one-day polling is possible due to improved infrastructure and efficiency. The EC has employed 112,000 workers and will have spent RM55 million to conduct the one-day election. Counting will begin at 6pm in all polling centres.

At stake are 192 parliamentary and 393 state seats. The Barisan Nasional (BN) won one parliamentary seat and one state seat uncontested on nomination day.

Most parliamentary and state seats will see straight fights between BN and opposition candidates. This is possible following the rare coalition of four major opposition parties - Pas, DAP, Keadilan and PRM - calling itself Barisan Alternatif.

The BN controlled 166 seats in the outgoing 192-member Parliament. It needs 129 to retain a two-thirds majority in the expanded 193-member Dewan Rakyat. The opposition hopes to deny the BN the two-thirds margin for the first time in three decades.

The BN and its predecessor, the Alliance, have won all the nine elections since Independence from Britain in 1957. The Alliance failed only once in 1969 to get a two-thirds majority. In each of the six general elections since 1974, the BN has secured more than a two-thirds majority. Prime Minister and BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has expressed confidence that BN will maintain its record of a two-thirds majority in this election.

"We will obtain more than a two-thirds majority because this time we have voters who were previously non-committed... the silent majority, now they are taking interest," Dr Mahathir said in Kuala Terengganu recently. Through the BN manifesto, newspaper advertisements, and their speeches, BN leaders have highlighted the achievements made under BN-rule for the past 42 years, and stressed that an experienced government is needed to lead the nation towards greater heights.

The opposition, rallying behind sacked former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, is calling on Malaysians to vote for change, alleging corruption and injustice by the BN Government.

Anwar, whom the opposition has named as their candidate for Prime Minister if they win the election, was sacked on September 2 1998 and expelled from Umno a day later on moral grounds. He is currently serving a six-year sentence for corruption and facing sodomy charges in court.

During eight days of intense campaigning, candidates went to the ground to meet their constituents and delivered ceramahs long into the night. A total of 6,126 permits for campaigns and ceramah were issued. Some of

these talks addressed issues of concern to their voters, while others degenerated into allegations and counter-allegations between both camps. For the voters, the ceramahs and visits gave them an opportunity to meet and listen to their potential representatives, and gauge their personalities and capabilities for themselves.

While political analysts unanimously agree that BN will win the election, there is still some uncertainty how far the Anwar issue will influence voters when they step into the polling booths.

BN's track record in the last 42 years will carry a lot of weight, especially for the older voters who were there when the country's wealth was not in Malaysians' hands, who witnessed the 1969 racial riots, and who have benefited and seen others benefit as well from the rapid economic progress and development.

The remarkable turnaround from the Asian financial crisis, the result of daring yet pragmatic policies implemented by the BN Government, will also be reflected in the voters' report cards.

Today, based on track record or swayed by promises of change, Malaysians will decide on who they want to lead for the next five years.

It is the people's right and a heavy responsibility to bear. But Malaysians can be trusted to choose wisely.

(END)