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Election ensures a field day for pundits and public intellectuals

Special Correspondent

WE are going to hear a lot more from shadowy political watchers and from cryptic pundits from now on since this general election will be lavished with extensive foreign media coverage.

Political watchers said this election is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's biggest political test in his 18 years in office, reports CNBC, the American television station, covering the elections for the first time soon after Parliament was dissolved last week.

CNN dispatched a correspondent who asked the Prime Minister at Wednesday's Press conference whether this was his popularity test, and was told it is what Barisan Nasional Government can achieve for the nation that matters.

Undaunted, the correspondent announced to world audience afterwards:

"This election is some kind of referendum on his popularity."

One wonders whether this was the line he was told to take from the outset.

The most mind boggling "assessment" was made by Time magazine (Nov 22). It said even a comfortable victory for BN could look like a defeat to Dr Mahathir.

In the 24 hours after the Wednesday's announcement, previously 'apolitical' Dr Chandra Muzaffar, now deputy president of Parti Keadilan Nasional, was interviewed first by CNN and later by CNBC. He intoned the right sound bites. "(Barisan Alternatif) is developing into a viable and cohesive alliance," Chandra said.

By Friday morning, CNBC had announced: "The Malaysian Opposition is determined to oust the Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad."

Curiously there were no details or interviews. Once CNN knew the election dates, it said Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang was sorely disappointed with the campaigning period.

Although in some strange ways, the enhanced profile assuredly gives us a sense of pride now that the world is more familiar with Malaysia, such high-visibility comes at a price.

For one, the tendency to make assumptions, to over-generalise and to rush to conclusions using unnamed tools like analysts, watchers, observers and pundits has long haunted the Western media.

This election will be filled with those attributes. When laced with a degree of herd instinct, formatted thinking and prejudices, the end-result is awesome as demonstrated in the March 12-13 Sabah election. Many of the foreign correspondents had then rushed into a self-fulfilling frenzy.

As narrated in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*, a witty novel about British journalists covering a coup of sorts in a far-flung country, in Sabah many of the foreign journalists assured each other the Barisan Nasional would be defeated. BN won comfortably when the Sabah elections, too, were touted as a test of Dr Mahathir's popularity.

Formatted-thinking comes from frequent trips to the same sources. We fervently hope foreign correspondents don't additionally use each other as reference.

In that case, they will happily agree with each other's so-called "assessment", deduced by talking to a few selected politicians. They are most of the time the Opposition or 'social critics', whose credibility has been battered now that they are all in the Opposition.

Having a lopsided view does not seem to worry sections of the foreign

media. We will thus see Chandra, Dr Syed Hussin Ali, Kit Siang and Lim Guan Eng being routinely quoted by the foreign media in this election.

Cemented at the back of the mind of many of the foreign journalists is the prejudice against Dr Mahathir. This colours their reportage and that is why they were quick to see the election as a Dr Mahathir-versus-Anwar Ibrahim battle although it is about determining the country's future.

And, there has been a distinct slant in their coverage of the Anwar episode which is the biggest indictment against them. Malaysians don't fuss over trivialities. Yet even a cursory look at Press cuttings show that the foreign media has unashamedly rooted for Anwar. In fact as a writer in Berita Harian pointed out, the likes of Newsweek even suggested that Dr Mahathir step down in favour of Anwar.

Herein lies the most pronounced difference between the international media's coverage of other countries and its devotion to Malaysia's political affairs. All the antics probably apply to other countries as well. But few leaders have been scrutinised the way Dr Mahathir has been.

This explains why sections of the foreign media are bent on believing there is widespread dissatisfaction with the Government. And regardless of this being an election about contest in 193 parliamentary constituencies and their State seats, which are also dictated by local issues, they are certain this is about testing Dr Mahathir's popularity.

Foreign publications are adamant that Umno will force the PM to go if he fails to deliver the two-thirds majority.

Of course there are the fairly objective correspondents who try to understand the nation's character in order to provide a truer picture.

Those who strive to fathom the peculiarities will see why there is no culture of opinion poll in Malaysia, when it is entrenched in the American system (from the time Dr George Gallup began experimenting with polling in 1934).

This flavour is being wittingly, or otherwise, transplanted to younger democracies like Malaysia's. We don't try to measure the popularity of political personalities.

Little wonder some democracies are exasperated at being judged by the same yardstick as the US system. Sahabzada Yaqub Khan, a former Pakistani Foreign Minister, made this point following events in his country:

"You Americans seem to possess democracy so naturally, and for us it is so difficult. But it took you centuries; give us a few years. Be patient with those to whom democracy does not come easily."

Malaysia has no such difficulties although some have accused the country of 'postponing full-fledged democracy in favour of prosperity'.

Democracy in Malaysia is evolving. The noise we have heard came with prosperity, and came mainly from the chattering classes (a British description of its politicians, writers and intellectuals. In our case it can be tentatively defined as learned individuals who are very opinionated).

A handful of these individuals have a fascination for terms like empowerment, participation, transparency and distributive justice. They tend to dominate discussions through the media, with some earning the title of 'public intellectuals'.

Some of these lawyers, doctors and lecturers are politicians themselves now, having abandoned their 'apolitical' stance that, in some cases, meant a distaste for politics. There are interesting tales about those who plunged into politics via Parti Keadilan Nasional when doctors and lawyers can't work together at the branch, a relationship wounded by personality clashes.

One accuses another of a lack of leadership. Sounds familiar? Isn't this politics as usual?

Politics in Malaysia transcends the middle-class urban, Kuala Lumpur crowd. It is about the expectations and hopes of entire populations. A vast majority works doggedly to improve their lives so that their children can move a notch higher up the economic ladder. They will decide who rules the country and issues that shall dominate the elections. Not the foreign media-Chandra Muzaffar crowd.

When more people express their views publicly, we may well find the issues raised veering from the Chandra Muzaffar-Jomo stereotype. Jomo K.S., it turned out, has never voted as was the case with R. Sivarasa, Keadilan's legal adviser. This revelation has severely dented the credibility of senior members of the Opposition.

Herein lies an inherent danger to the electoral process and the country's future. We have the pseudo-intellectuals telling us what is right for the nation when they are actually Opposition members who are sorely out of step with the rest. Then we have the foreign media who consult and agree with them.

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