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Getting the silent majority to vote

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IT HAS almost come to be expected that about 30 per cent of registered voters would not exercise their right every five years or so to determine who should run the country.

Lack of awareness is unlikely to be the reason because election campaigning, which can last slightly more than a week to as long as a month, has always been lively affairs; loud and colourful enough sometimes to draw attention even of foreign countries.

Banners and logos of the political protagonists scream for attention in an open "poster warfare" that sees the streets, lamp posts, bus stands, shops, trees, and also vehicles used to the fullest to raise the profiles of the parties and their candidates.

Gatherings are held from one public hall to another, and in open spaces. For some candidates more than others, it is an occasion to get close to the people they hope to represent.

Still, after nine general elections going on 10, a sizeable portion of the electorate remains unmoved, whether they feel that their votes would not matter or they are just not bothered.

In the 1959 polls, only 73.3 per cent of registered voters went out to cast their ballots in the Parliamentary elections and 74.3 per cent in the state seat contests.

The pattern has been maintained right up to 1995, where voter turnout for parliamentary elections was 71.9 per cent and state elections 73.4 per cent. There were 9.01 million registered voters then.

Sabah and Sarawak do not hold their state elections simultaneously in the general elections. The Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan, meanwhile, have no state legislative assemblies.

The inactive 30 per cent comprises Malaysian adults who choose not to exercise their right, have failed to register themselves, or are ambivalent about which party emerges the victor.

Sometimes, people also do not vote because they take for granted the candidates of their choice will win anyway.

Early this week, Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional (BN) chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad called on the party's election machinery to target this silent majority.

Speaking at a gathering of BN candidates for the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur constituencies, he said: "Although these groups usually voted for the BN, sometimes they think that the BN will win, so they don't come out to vote... We want a bigger majority... we want the silent majority to come out and vote".

BN has explained that it needs at least a two-thirds majority in Parliament to ensure expeditious devising and implementation of policies to further develop the country, as well as to maintain an environment of stability, peace and harmony.

For a developing country, hard decisions will always have to be made, and sometimes unpopular but necessary measures must be introduced, like in the case of the selective capital controls in September 1998.

Ridiculed and scoffed at initially, these policies have since won praises and even held up as a "crisis management" model, because of the ample proof that they work.

Malaysia registered an 8.1 per cent gross domestic growth (GDP) growth in the third quarter of this year, the highest quarterly economic

expansion since the start of the regional financial crisis in July 1997. GDP contracted by 1.3 per cent in the first quarter but expanded 4.1 per cent in the following three months. Last year, the economy posted a negative growth of 7.5 per cent. For the whole of 1999, GDP is now expected to exceed 4.3 per cent, which itself was revised from an earlier forecast of 1 per cent.

The BN administration could not have even begun to address the challenges of the past two years had it not have the backing of the majority of Malaysians.

The coalition of 14 political parties is confident of securing such a mandate from the people again. It has enjoyed at least a two-thirds majority in Parliament since Independence.

While there is every reason to expect it to continue to do so, the BN itself is not taking things for granted, not least it knows many more challenges lie ahead for the nation in the new millennium.

For the silent majority, it may be worthwhile noting that the November 29 polls will be the millennium's last occasion for them to exercise their electoral rights.

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