

11/11/1999

Govt for the new millennium

MALAYSIANS will be casting their votes, probably before the end of this month, to elect a government to lead the country into the next millennium. Some 9.7 million adults of various races and religions and from walks of life will be given the opportunity to exercise their right and responsibility as citizens. They include 700,000 people who will cast their votes for the first time. The campaigning period, as in the past few elections, is not expected to be too long but there will be sufficient time for the various political parties to try and sway voters one way or the other.

While Malaysians are not new at the game, many foreigners have shown that they have not quite grasped the basics of Malaysian politics, and possibly even refuse to understand the reason this developing country holds general elections. Some think - and this was suggested by a foreign television reporter during the press conference yesterday to announce the dissolution of parliament - that the general elections would be a popularity contest between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his former deputy Datuk Seri Dr Anwar Ibrahim. Others had proposed that independent foreign observers be invited to ensure fair polling. There are also those who believe that the elections are being called now because the Barisan Nasional would like to avoid new voters who will be eligible to vote from next year. This comes with the assumption, of course, that these new voters are young and, therefore, would be voting against the Government.

It is important that Malaysians, especially the voters, remember that general elections are occasions when the people have their say to determine a government that will administer this country in the interest of the rakyat - including those who do not vote or voted against the eventual government - for the next five years. It is not about Dr Mahathir or his opponents or the aspiring wakil rakyat contesting in a constituency. Rather, it is about political parties that will form the next government. In the US, the presidential election is indeed largely a contest of popularity. In Malaysia, the elected government is tasked with the heavy responsibility of putting in place policies to enhance progress and development. The people are asked to help decide the course of the country and the economy, which is why it is extremely important that the voters cast their ballots wisely.

The major issues facing Malaysians are still centred on economic development. Since the Barisan Nasional, and its predecessor the Alliance, won the first general elections, there has been peace and harmony among the various races and much prosperity shared equitably by all. Malaysia has been transformed from a country that only had commodities to sell to the world into a dynamic nation that makes and exports high-technology products, has one of the fastest-growing economies, and boasts of a number of the tallest, biggest or best. It has conquered poverty and unemployment, overcome a brief but bloody racial riot, and given birth to world-class leaders in both government and industries. In just over four decades after Independence, the nation has acquired sufficient self-confidence to aspire to join the ranks of the industrialised countries. Even the regional economic crisis, said to be one of the worst the world has seen, failed to dampen the country's determination to march on to greater things.

This is the track record of not only the country but also that of the Barisan Nasional, because under Dr Mahathir and the prime ministers before him, the people have kept faith with the coalition at every general elections. Throughout the history of post-Merdeka Malaya/Malaysia, general elections have been fair, and free of vote-rigging and of untoward incidents. The political system has been the key to the nation's prosperity and progress. Many outsiders would want this to change for the sake of change, but Malaysia is not their home and their future is not here. They therefore certainly do not have the right to deny Malaysians the chance to chart their own destiny.

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