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Election

MALAYSIANS VOTE ON MONDAY TO ELECT GOVT

By: E. Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 27 (Bernama) -- Malaysians go to the polls on Monday with the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition confident of retaining power and maintaining its record of a two-thirds majority in the most hotly contested general election in three decades.

The four-party opposition front, on the other hand, is optimistic that it could break BN's impressive record since 1974, at least as far as DAP, Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan) and PRM are concerned.

As for PAS, although it supported the move by its partners in the so-called Barisan Alternatif to deny BN the two-thirds majority, it was still upbeat about the opposition front winning enough seats to form the next government.

The BN and its predecessor, the Alliance, have won all the nine elections since Independence from Britain in 1957. And in each of the six general elections since 1974, the BN has secured more than a two-thirds majority.

The Alliance failed only once in 1969 to muster a two-thirds majority which triggered off race riots on May 13 the same year.

Political analysts expected the BN to win in the 10th general election, said to be the toughest for the ruling coalition.

However, they were unsure if the BN would be able to maintain its more than two-thirds majority margin.

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

In the 1995 general election, the 14-party multi-ethnic BN coalition won a record four-fifths majority.

Can the BN repeat its 1995 performance, its best ever showing in the polls?

"It is difficult to say," says Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia senior political science lecturer Prof. Dr P.Ramasamy.

He said that it would not be a problem for BN to "pull through" with a majority in this election.

Dr Ramasamy said although a two-thirds majority might be "difficult for BN to achieve, but the odds are against the opposition."

He said the opposition might secure more seats this time but not enough to deny the BN a victory.

He also said he would not know how the split in the Malay community over the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim factor would be manifested in their voting.

Anwar, the prime ministerial candidate for the opposition should they win in the Nov 29 polls, was sacked as Deputy Prime Minister on Sept 2, 1998 and expelled from Umno a day later on moral grounds. He is currently serving a six-year sentence for corruption.

While the pundits are unsure of BN retaining its two-thirds majority in Parliament, Prime Minister and BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is optimistic.

"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 yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said while the non-Malays were concerned over PAS'proposal to set up an Islamic state, the Malays were equally concerned with DAP seeking to abolish the privileges of the Malays.

As cracks appear to widen in the opposition camp over PAS' proposed Islamic state and Hudud laws, Keadilan president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail had to move in to calm the "situation".

"There is unity. We know our differences. We entered into this working relationship knowing our differences," said Azizah, the wife of Anwar Ibrahim at a hastily arranged news conference here yesterday, two days before polling.

Dr Wan Azizah who will be defending her husband's Permatang Pauh parliament seat said she would not speculate on her chances of winning. "I think it is too premature to say anything and (especially) with the onslaught of the media (being) rather one-sided," she said.

If in the 1995 polls, the BN had to rely on an economic boom to perform its best, this time around the BN would be banking on its many successes, including to initiate a speedy recovery from the financial and economic crisis that plagued the country in mid-1997.

Bank Negars's confirmation that Malaysia was officially out of recession has also added a plus point for the BN as it shifts its election campaign into high gear with barely 48 hours before Malaysians cast their ballots.

As the BN and the opposition engaged themselves in heated arguments and verbal attacks, for the "man on the street", the time has come for him and her to decide on what would be best for them and the country into the new century come Monday.

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