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Malaysians to decide for the new millennium

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THE guessing game is over. Polling for the country's 10th general elections will be on November 29 with nomination on November 20. For the first time polling will be just one day throughout the country, including Sabah and Sarawak.

Campaigning which has been going on for more than a year will certainly heat up. The poster war which had also started in some parts of the country even before Parliament was dissolved last Thursday, will now add even more colour to the Malaysian landscape.

In addition to the poster war, the battle to woo the 9.7 million voters in the country 193 parliamentary and 394 state seats will be "fought" on various fronts. The Opposition has admitted that it cannot "win" and form the Government. The fragmented Opposition with its differing views, ideologies and goals claims it wants to deny the ruling Barisan Nasional the two third majority. The Barisan Nasional on the other hand expressed confidence that it will retain its two third majority.

In the last Parliament Barisan Nasional had 166 seats with the Opposition DAP, PAS and PBS holding 23 between them and Independents occupying three seats.

Undoubtedly the election will be a keen contest. A lot of accusations and counter accusations will be made. The campaign is likely to become increasingly personal. It is after all a period when all caution is thrown to the winds. But Malaysian voters are mature and rational. They are not likely to be taken in by empty promises.

The eight day campaign period has been described by the Opposition as being too short. However it must be remembered that this is not the first time that the campaign period is "short". In 1986 the campaign period lasted eight days. Infact the period between dissolution of parliament and polling was just 14 days even shorter than the 18 days for the current elections.

Even so it is important to ensure that the harmony, peace and stability, which all Malaysians value, are not sacrificed. Malaysian elections have always been conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner. Despite the various races and religions coupled with the differing political ideologies a situation should not be created to destabilise the hard won stability, progress and development of the nation.

Malaysians have much to be grateful for. The economy has recovered from the worst recession and they have been spared the hardships faced by many in other crisis hit countries in the region. The economy is forecast to grow at 4.4 per cent this year after contracting 7.5 per cent last year. But many analysts expect a higher growth than that forecast by the Government. Dresdner Kleinworth Benson, for example, says the official growth rates "are easily achievable" and its own forecast for GDP growth target is 6.5 per cent this year and 7 per cent for 2000.

Indonesia, Thailand and South Korea which turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance find that they ended up being "experiments" which failed and the IMF had to reverse gear and implement many of the same policies as Malaysia. Even so the fallout of the crisis is being felt in the three countries which are still under the IMF's care. The Bank Bali episode in Indonesia, the Krung Thai Bank situation in Thailand and the Daewoo "crisis" in South Korea "developed" despite the countries being under the "scrutiny and tutelage" of the IMF. These

"episodes" are yet to be "played out" and will undoubtedly leave a bad taste long after they have been "resolved".

In addition, unlike Malaysia, these countries have to repay the IMF loans and as such their usable foreign reserves are much lower than Malaysia's which are currently sufficient to finance 6.2 months of retained imports.

The IMF, which according to its outgoing managing director, Mr Michel Camdessus, "...created the conditions that obliged President Suharto to leave his job" has not been "welcome into Malaysia" to resolve the crisis even though its policies were initially adopted without its funds.

Malaysians have shown that they are capable of achieving greater heights, given the chance. As such self confidence is not and should not be misplaced. Unfriendly elements should not be given an opportunity to capitalise and undermine the development and achievements of the country. Malaysians are capable of planning, devising and implementing policies best suited to local conditions, instead of adopting "ready made and one size fits all" policies advocated by international and multilateral organisations.

Besides, the conditions created by the IMF in Indonesia caused untold suffering leaving many dead, hungry, out of jobs and falling deeper into the poverty trap. No independent country is "obliged" to take the "advice" of the IMF and certainly Malaysians are better off without the IMF.

Administering a country is a heavy responsibility and a very serious business. It is not an empirical, text book case study. Here real people are involved.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said when announcing the dissolution of parliament on November 10, elections are "...a serious business of determining who is going to form the government of this country" adding that he does not call elections "...to test my popularity against somebody".

Not only are elections "a serious business" they are also an expensive affair. According to the Election Commission the elections this year is estimated to cost RM55 million compared with RM40 million for the last general election in 1995. In 1959, the country's first general elections after independence from the British, the cost was RM1.047 million.

Commentators and analysts will certainly cite examples of changes that have taken place in the region - with new governments in Indonesia, Thailand and South Korea. But it is not these commentators and analysts that have a say in the election of leaders in any of these countries, least of all in Malaysia. It is the Malaysian citizens and electorate who have to decide for themselves who they want to lead them into the next century and the new millennium.

There will be efforts to influence voters. But Malaysians need to be mindful of the fact that they should decide their own future and not be influenced by others who think that they know what and who Malaysians and Malaysia deserves. Many analysts and commentators do not live in this country, they do not earn their living in this country and they have no loyalty to this country.

As such they have no legitimate right to dictate who should take this country forward into the next millennium. This is a decision which the Malaysian electorate must make for themselves. They are mature and rational and there is no doubt that they will make an educated and a rational choice.

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