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## Students play vital role in shaping the nation

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BACK on September 9 1999, when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad held a dialogue in Bangi with some 4,000 students from the country's 11 public and four private universities, not everyone was listening.

In the back rows of the hall, some students had dozed off, others were engaged in idle chatter amongst themselves, while a few boys were getting acquainted with the girls seated in front of them.

This illustrates one flaw in the generalisation that all university students are concerned with current affairs in the country.

But there are some among the youth who genuinely feel they have a vital role to play in shaping the nation.

This desire to "do something" is manifested in many ways.

Those aged above 21 register to vote or become members or volunteers of political parties. The younger ones become student leaders, and from this platform hope to have their voices heard.

After the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the voices grew louder and increasingly anti-government. Several students were arrested and later expelled for participating in street demonstrations.

The Government claimed the Opposition was responsible for inciting the students, and made an effort to meet with university students to explain and discuss current affairs.

"The current generation is markedly different from previous ones. Young Malaysians don't feel that they should be "grateful" to the Government for the prosperity it has brought about. They feel that this should after all be the natural duty of any Government," Malaysian Strategic Research Centre executive director Abdul Razak Baginda says.

Writing in the upcoming November 25 issue of the Far Eastern Economic Review, he said the youth also do not much appreciate the Government's efforts on their behalf.

"It will be interesting to see if the attitudinal change among younger voters will have an impact in polling behaviour," Abdul Razak said.

According to the Statistics Department, Malaysians aged 15-24 and 25-44 account for about 19 per cent and 29 per cent respectively of the total population.

That could be a sizeable number of voters.

The political parties apparently believe the youth will have some impact, and are introducing new younger faces to contest in the November 29 general election.

Dr Mahathir, speaking over Radio Alor Star on Saturday said the Barisan Nasional line-up was carefully selected to ensure an injection of new ideas. He said although many senior politicians who were not chosen were still capable and energetic, "we must be willing to sacrifice".

On average, about 35 per cent of the candidates in the general election are "youthful" faces aged below 40. Umno Youth alone, has 26 candidates contesting in parliamentary and state seats. This will inject a fresh group of politicians for the next millennium and at the same time targetting the younger voters.

"However, it must be realised that the number of such voters isn't yet substantial; the real impact may not come until subsequent elections. Yet that does not mean that there isn't an urgent need for a more frank exchange of views between the young and the Government," he said, adding that it is not enough for the Government to try to aim an electoral

platform at this constituency. It needs to engage them in dialogue to understand their concerns.

"It is critical that these voters aren't alienated or disenfranchised. The future lies with them.

One possible avenue for such dialogue is the proposed National Student's Consultative Council, announced by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on October 16, a little over a week after pacifying students who demonstrated at Universiti Malaya.

Abdullah had said the council will function as a forum where university students can air grievances and engage in constructive dialogue with the Government. Representatives from public and private universities will be invited to sit on the council.

For the moment, however, it appears that political infighting among student organisations themselves has delayed the formation and functioning of the proposed council. There are student organisations that support the proposal and others than oppose it, and both claim to speak for all students.

Another faction has gone so far as to launch what they called "10 Election Demands by National Students", calling on the people to elect a new government and reject the old in the general election.

The students will need to resolve their internal differences first, and perhaps gain a little maturity in the process. That way, their particular group will be able to speak with one voice, and be better heard.

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