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Time to look to the future

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BARISAN Nasional (BN) has launched its manifesto - a public declaration of intent, policy, and aims - for the November 29 general elections. The 20-page document is titled "Free, United, Successful", and by now several million copies will have been distributed to voters throughout the nation. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad unveiled the manifesto at the Putra World Trade Centre on Sunday, the fifth such document he has launched.

The BN manifestos over the years have had a number of similarities. They are all in simple language and to the point, and use a generous amount of photographs.

"This makes it easier for people to understand and digest. The manifestos not only recall the performance of the country under BN rule, but also include our plans for the future," BN director of elections Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob told Business Times yesterday.

Some plans have continued to be stressed, by virtue of the long-term nature of the issues involved, requiring the BN to reassure the people that its position on these matters has not changed.

Among them are the pledge to fight fanaticism and extremism, and efforts to ensure continued peace and stability, to eradicate poverty, and to increase low-cost housing. Malaysians have also been assured in all BN manifestos that there will be no change in the Government's stand on Chinese and Tamil medium schools, its foreign policy, and the emphasis on strengthening national unity.

At the same time, the BN manifestos have included promises that clearly state how the coalition intends to develop the economy and benefit the people.

In 1982, the focus was to promote private sector enterprise, push ahead with industrialisation by emphasising on heavy industry and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), expand infrastructure and amenities, and further develop the agricultural sector.

"It is time to strengthen our commitment and to move with all the vigour we can muster to transform this country into an economically advanced, spiritually resilient, disciplined and united nation that will command the respect of all nations," Dr Mahathir had said in his message to the 1982 BN manifesto.

In 1986, while the nation was clawing out of recession, the BN manifesto argued that the country needed a steady, experienced, and strong government, especially when the going was tough.

"The People's Champion", as the manifesto was called, pledged to tackle the serious problem of unemployment, to build 250,000 low-cost houses in three years, to go into heavy industry while widening the depth and breath of light industries, to foster development of SMEs, and to help create large Malaysian corporations.

The BN also promised to invest "massive resources to create conditions that will allow the poor to lift themselves from the pit of poverty". The economy had improved by 1990, and so the BN manifesto highlighted strategies to bring the nation greater prosperity. It promised to generate more jobs and better pay, to strive to attain full employment, prepay debts and reduce debt servicing.

In agriculture, the 1990 BN manifesto pledged to diversify crops, modernise the sector to increase efficiency and profitability, and improve yield and reduce costs through more research and development.

"Computer literacy, technical and management skills will be taught to prepare students for life in an industrialised society," the manifesto said, adding that the administration would also be improved through greater office automation, less red tape, better salaries, and stepped-up training.

What followed, of course, was seven consecutive years of high growth and prosperity, allowing the country to join the ranks of what were subsequently billed as the East Asian Miracle economies.

The momentum was built upon in the 1995 BN manifesto, this time giving special emphasis to the Malaysia Inc concept and privatization.

The manifesto also highlighted achievements ranging from increased per capita income to greater self-confidence among the young.

The focus of the industrialisation drive shifted to high technology and sophisticated heavy industries, and such activities would be dispersed to all states, including the East Coast of the Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak.

The manifesto also pledged to control inflation, reduce outflow of funds, attract foreign capital, and maintain stability of the ringgit.

Nearly five years later, and after having faced and quelled arguably the biggest threat to its economy since Independence, the 1999 BN manifesto logically highlights 42 years of Malaysia's achievements under BN rule, pledges greater progress for the nation, and reminds the people of their independence, unity, and success.

Coming on the eve of the new millennium, it is appropriate to reflect on the past as the nation looks to the future. Like in 1990, the new manifesto has as its backdrop an economy bouncing back from recession.

The earlier manifesto had proclaimed "the BN is no longer dealing with promises, because we have kept all of them. We are now dealing with plans for our future generations."

And a bright future for new generations of Malaysians is its pledge today.