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Card system ideal for orderly polls

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has indicated that our electoral laws will have to be changed following the experiences of last year's general election and the recently concluded Sanggang by-election.

Quite obviously the changes are necessary and is not a case of blaming the playing field when one has lost the game, particularly when the Barisan Nasional has won both elections.

I was a member of the international observer group of the parliamentary elections of Sri Lanka in 1994 and perhaps some of the electoral laws of that Republic will be of interest here.

In January of each year, the Commissioner of Elections is required to publish a notice calling upon the secretary of any political party to apply that such party be treated as a recognised political party for the purpose of elections. Once recognised, however, the party may participate in subsequent elections without having to re-apply each year.

Such a provision is useful in preventing the spectacle of new political parties mushrooming on the eve of a general election and complaints of delays in the registration of political parties.

In Sri Lanka, the President in proclaiming the dissolution of Parliament shall also specify the nomination period and date of polling. The nomination period commences on the 14th day after the date of publication in the Gazette of the proclamation and expires on the 21st day after the date of the proclamation.

Polling day shall not be less than three weeks and not more than eight weeks after the closing day of the nomination period.

All citizens who have attained the age of 18 are qualified to vote and to stand for election to Parliament.

During the election campaign period public rallies are allowed. There is however, a restriction on processions commencing from the first day of the nomination period and ending one week after the declaration of the result of the poll.

Campaigning for political parties and candidates is allowed in the daily newspapers. It was apparent however that one newspaper exclusively favoured the incumbent government but the impact of such publication was counter balanced by a rival newspaper in favour of the opposition.

Under the electoral law, the political parties contesting the election receive equal time for their own broadcasts on State television and radio stations.

Every recognised political party is entitled to receive in respect of a general election financial assistance by way of a grant from the State at the rate of 50 cents per vote polled by the party in the electoral district at the last preceding general election and has submitted a nomination paper for the current election. The grant is payable within 10 days after closing of nominations.

Public meetings are not allowed during the period of 48 hours before polling and ending one week after declaration of the results.

The returning officer of the electoral district is required to send by post to every registered voter the official poll card which states the date and time of the poll and the polling station not less than seven days before the poll.

In cases of non-delivery, the post office is required to retain the card until polling day for the voter to claim. The card is a means of

identification and entitles the voter to the ballot paper.

The poll card is retained by the polling station and the little finger of the voter is marked by indelible ink to prevent further voting. The procedure for voting and the counting of votes is more or less the same as in Malaysia.

On polling day canvassing for votes is prohibited within half a kilometre to the entrance of the polling station which includes distributing or exhibiting any handbill, placard poster, drawing or photograph of a candidate or party symbol.

In addition use of loudspeakers, shouting or acting in a disorderly manner within the entrance to the polling station so as to cause annoyance to any person visiting the polling station are punishable offences.

Indeed the official poll card system has made the practice of establishing party booths outside polling stations for the purpose of assisting voters redundant.

During my visits to polling stations there were no such booths. The entire place on polling day was peaceful and deserted even except for the queues of voters at the polling stations.

Sri Lanka has 11 million registered voters and the poll card system was effective in holding an orderly election. If we had such a system, the Chairman of the Election Commission, Datuk Omar Hashim would not have occasion to express his concern at the large number of men who lined the road to the polling stations which frightened away the women voters at the Sanggang by-election.

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