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George W Bush for US President

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THE personality and policies of a new president of the United States are of deep importance to every government, friendly and not-so-friendly, or hostile.

I await the result of the US presidential election on Wednesday morning with eagerness for two reasons. First, I think it is important to be prepared if Al Gore wins even though Malaysia is insignificant in American Foreign Policy. It only becomes particularly relevant because he starts his tenure with great prejudice against the present government.

Second, because I do follow American politics even though not as avidly since coming home from New York last May.

It does seem, as I have said before, a neck-and-neck race, predicted to be the closest presidential election since 1960.

My American friends (and millions of other Americans) cringe at the prospect of either Al Gore or George W. Bush becoming their 43rd President come Wednesday.

The voters have a tough choice to make; either George W. Bush will win, because he certainly appears more likeable and more importantly (if I were an American) more believable, or Al Gore, because he has been second-in-command for the last eight years and therefore appears to be better prepared to be President.

This is an advantage as well as a poisoned chalice. Gore is a major figure in the Clinton Administration which singularly lacks a moral and political ethical code, though a popular administration because of the general US economic prosperity.

The voters, according to even the New York Times, seem more comfortable with Bush's personality than Gore's and are therefore attracted to him. They feel Bush is a leader who does not talk down to them and would come to the White House free of any connection to Clinton's excesses.

Talking of the Clintons, Hillary, the brainy and tenacious first lady, is poised to win America's most closely watched and coveted senate race.

Hillary is the first first lady who ever attempts to win an elected office. I wrote four years ago that she is the woman to watch. She will be a worthy successor of senator Patrick Moynihan, the senior senator from New York state.

Much of the campaign, because there exists hardly any ideological or fundamental difference between the Republicans or Democrats, has focused on Bush's intellectual capacity, whether he can cope with holding what is supposedly, to some, the highest political office in the world, and Gore's awkward personality and efforts by his spin doctors in trying to make him seem less a cold fish, less aloof, less overbearing and more credible.

How ironic it is that what is touted as the closest presidential election in decades offers voters a choice of two seemingly uninspiring candidates.

Beyond that, and unlike Richard Nixon and John Kennedy in 1960, Bush and Gore really offer a choice (personality wise) that is between apples and oranges. Their personalities, strengths and weaknesses are so contrasting.

What will count in the dying hours before polling will be what personality trait the voters think counts for most in their President. The outcome will also be determined by what is called American practical politics, an euphemism for cynical political dealings which happens so very often in American elections, especially in Chicago.

Nixon, even on his deathbed, believed that the 1960 election was stolen from him in Cook County, Chicago. I want to see Bush win in the firm belief that he will go just as far in bringing back morality, honour and dignity to the White House.

Bush is "untainted" and I hope he will bring back an extra measure of talent (even if he himself is seen as lacking in that department by many), such as the likes of General Colin Powell, into his Administration.

I also hope that a Bush Administration will see less projection of American military and economic might overseas, unless American interests are really at stake. General Powell is Bush's likely Secretary of State. Gore, on the other hand, as even The New York Times, one of his staunchest supporters, has expressed concern, might sometimes be too eager to project power overseas.

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has forewarned Malaysians that Malaysia-US bilateral relations might suffer if Gore becomes President.

We all are only too well aware of his preference in Malaysian politics.

With Gore in the White House and Richard Holbrooke as his Secretary of State, the Malaysian opposition parties, Keadilan in particular, are expected to be transformed into a full-fledged Washington-backed political opposition to Dr Mahathir and the democratically elected Barisan Nasional Government.

Several Malays who hate Dr Mahathir are already busy buying influence on Capitol Hill. As my friend Tan Sri Razali Ismail told an audience of some three hundred people last week, "All the precipitative changes around us illustrate two basic points; one, everything happens faster and second, anything that can be done will be done, if not by you, then by someone else, somewhere in the world. Let there be no misunderstanding.

These changes can lead to a less kind, less gentle and even less predictable world."

Razali was speaking about globalisation and how to treat change. Still, what he said has relevance to the vigorous efforts being made by several Malays and their American cohorts in the American capital.

A rare Sunday Star editorial says, "Such action borders on treason because, simply put, it is about inviting foreigners to attack our economy. At the end of the day, the people (rakyat), especially the poor and weak, will be hurt." The editorial urges a counter to the campaign before it damages the nation and the welfare of its people. This Government has a great capacity for tolerance. It believes more in rhetoric than deeds even when dealing with its dangerous opponents because it says it is a democratic government, though judging by what is said about it abroad, and as contended by the reformasi boys, no body believes it.

Since none of its opponents within and without believes that this Government is democratic, what has the Government got to lose if it does what it thinks is right for the country before these reformasi boys and their foreign friends do some real damage?

Learn well from Singapore and China. A Gore White House, in particular, will be tough on us, China, Myanmar and a host of other nations they don't like. However, if you are one of their allies in West Asia, where in some places there are still no elections, where cronyism and abuse of power by the very privileged and very few is even more rampant and pervasive as is corruption and where the laws are even more brutal and oppressive, you will be tolerated and your gross abuse of human rights will be overlooked.

Your people will not be asked to rise and overthrow the ruling regime if even to institute democratic elections. Sometimes I wonder what if, say 10 years ago (I say 10 years ago because I doubt whether the US would

authorise such sales today, but then again who knows?), all branches of our armed forces massively re-equipped and modernised by buying American weapons. We spent billions of US dollars and with the likelihood of spending further billions more to continuously upgrade and modernise the equipment in the future. It does not matter if the spending on all this military equipment had put a severe stress on our reserves, threatened the economy by diverting funds away from projects which would have directly benefited the rakyat and which are more productive and caused a major arms race in the region (this would only really concern the powers that be if those involved were buying weapons from the wrong firms, of course).

If this had happened, would we be in the predicament that we are in today, worrying about who wins the next US Presidential election? Would Gore have been so rude to Dr Mahathir and asked people to rebel? Would Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim even be still remembered and mentioned in the same breath everytime Malaysia is mentioned by some people? I view the role of government differently. The question whether we can advance, moving from where we are, is dependent on Putrajaya. Putrajaya decides whether to take a blatant campaign against national interests (not against the person of Dr Mahathir) lightly or otherwise.

As The Star urges, and I agree with it, Putrajaya must nip it in the bud before these reformasi boys derail national planning and wreck the economy. It is no sheer coincidence that the smear campaigns have been renewed with vigour to ensure that their icon is put back in the spotlight.

In Washington, there are as many influence peddlers, lobbyists and what have you, as there are Datuks and Datins in our nation. They are paid to attempt to influence governmental decisions and particularly legislation in the Congress.

The reformasi boys have engaged lobbyists and via these people they have got six Congressmen and a Congresswoman to do their bidding. It is a long process before what they want reaches the floor of the Congress. Still, we must not take things for granted. He who does so imperils himself. Students of American politics will recall all about the China lobby, Israel or Jewish lobby and of late, even the Arab lobby. Now, it seems, the most recent is the Malaysian reformasi lobby.

The China lobby supported Chiang Kai-Shek and Taiwan, and for 22 years it succeeded to keep Taiwan (posing as China) in the United Nations (UN). Personally, I was delighted when I accompanied Tun Razak to the UN in 1971 to witness Tun Razak personally voting in favour of China's admission to the UN. In the end the China lobby was viewed as having been over-rated when Nixon went to China in 1972.

The Israel or Jewish lobby is the most powerful as well as the most successful. The Arab lobby pales in comparison. The nascent reformasi lobby, it seems, is not devoid of connections with various lobby groups on Capitol Hill. The shuttlecock is now in Putrajaya's side of the court. The player can smash, lob, drop or send the shuttlecock out. I have no doubt the player will be incredibly resourceful, imaginative and adept, as he has been in the past.

As a result I have no doubt if he remains as such, Malaysia should survive and thrive whoever moves into the White House.

Clinton, the master politician, is worried about his lacklustre vice president and has been dispensing a poorly disguised tutorial on the subject of winning and influencing voters. Gore, on the other hand, continuously strives to distance himself from the President, the man he seeks to replace, because of the Monica Lewinsky baggage. Clinton, in case Gore loses, is at least sure that his wife will keep the Clinton flame burning in Washington.

Perhaps deep in his heart, who knows, Clinton may prefer Gore to lose. If Hillary wins, and Gore is defeated, Hillary will become the number one democrat in the country. And I know where that could lead in 2004.

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