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PM questions the need for change in Government

Ahmad A. Talib in Cambridge, England

MALAYSIANS, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, had two choices - change the Government for the sake of democracy or retain it and allow the present set of policies to continue to help drive the country to become a developed nation by 2020.

Said the Prime Minister: "Is it democratic to have the same party returned time and again? Some say it is not democratic. They say a democratic country must see frequent changes of government. Will the future see such a change? It is possible, of course.

"Many are already saying that we need a change, we need a new Government merely for the sake of change. That the present Government performs well is no reason for not changing."

Dr Mahathir was asked to gaze into his crystal ball and share his thoughts with participants in a conference organised by the Cambridge University Malaysia Society yesterday. He was given a topic to articulate - Malaysia in the new Millennium. (Full text of speech tomorrow.)

Drawing several possible scenarios, he said: "Assuming that a new party is elected to form the Government, it must change most of the plans and policies of the previous Government. Perhaps the changes would be good for the country. But changes must create uncertainties and uncertainties must disrupt.

"The present Government is business-friendly. It encourages the private sector, including foreigners, to invest and act as the engine of growth. But a new Government might not think that being business-friendly and giving the private sector a major role in the economy is a good thing.

"Promises and agreements made by the present Government will accordingly be dumped. This will hurt investors, both local and foreign. They will take their business elsewhere Changing Government may be considered democratic but it is very disruptive. It affects a country's development adversely. Again, we have to consider whether we want democracy for its sake or we want democracy for the good that it can deliver."

Giving his audience much food for thought, the Prime Minister spoke of the country's foundation laid by previous leaders, such as the "neat arrangement" involving race-based political parties working within a coalition on a power-sharing formula.

This arrangement has provided political stability needed for the country's growth, but whether it continues to function or not would depend on the coalition Government promoting the interests of all the races more evenly.

"It will not do for the coalition government to neglect any of the races because this will result in a breakdown in the coalition party. Failure of the races and parties to support each other will result in the coalition losing the election."

Dr Mahathir's closing remarks reflected his preferred scenario: "Malaysians will make every effort to bring about the best scenario, that of a stable, rapidly growing country which will become developed by 2020 And so it is quite likely that Malaysia in the new millennium will be a developed nation of 30 million plus hardworking, peace-loving people, respected and trusted by the rest of the world."

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