

# A new political scenario

## BN representatives should serve all Malaysians, says Mahathir

By **Claudia Theophilus**

Will the Barisan Nasional (BN) be able to discard racial politics and strengthen its position in the face of waning public support?

For the first time in two decades as the prime minister, BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has acknowledged the changing political scenario and the BN's need to remain relevant to the Malaysian public.

The urgency of the situation was reflected in his speech at yesterday's BN convention when he urged the delegates to discard racial politics and serve all Malaysians, irrespective of race.

Citing talks that peo-

who and how to serve.

Should it not be the inherent duty of each elected representative to serve his entire constituency, irrespective of race, creed or colour?

Obviously, the total lack of initiative by component party leaders has led to this, otherwise, Mahathir would not be asking the MPs, state assemblymen and local leaders to do the obvious.

Historically, Malaysian politics has run along racial lines because of the very nature of the ruling coalition which is made up mostly of ethnic-based components.

The exceptions, according to Mahathir, are the Sabah-based members which admit Sabahans of Chinese descent and Kadazans as members.

ple are very unhappy with racial practices, Mahathir said it is an "unhealthy situation" which does not augur well for the BN's future.

In effect, he has told the BN *wakil rakyat* and component parties to stop favouring constituents from their own race and to reach out to everyone, if they want to retain power.

By stating this, Mahathir is acknowledging the fact that the BN has failed to achieve what it was supposed to do in the first place.

Ironically, Saturday's BN convention, the second since its inception in 1974, was themed *Barisan Nasional - Pillar of the Nation's Integrity*.

After being in power for almost half a century, it should be unnecessary to tell BN representatives and component parties

However, the local political scene has changed by leaps and bounds in the last few years, leading to a soul-searching within the BN and prompting it to adopt a different approach.

This is because public sentiment and priorities have changed, as pointed out by Mahathir, where feelings of gratitude are being replaced by non-traditional issues.

There is an obvious shift in public sentiment from issues of modernisation to other higher-level demands for transparency, accountability, justice and freedom.

While Mahathir says only a strong coalition, based on better understanding and close cooperation among component parties, can ensure the BN's continued power, the fact is that political parties are competing for

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ground support in a race none can afford to lose.

Therefore, to say that the BN cannot afford to lose votes in such a volatile political environment is actually an understatement.

But why adopt a different approach now, when the BN formula has always

been touted, particularly during election campaigns, as the world's most successful in a multi-racial society?

The fact that several component party leaders, including Sabah Progressive Party president Datuk Yong Teck Lee and Gerakan president Datuk Seri

Dr Lim Keng Yaik, had supported the call to discard racial politics raises the question why they had to wait all these years until it was spelt out clearly?

Mere rhetoric about winning the hearts and minds of the people when the country's political culture is getting increasingly

racial and religious?

An eminent academician pointed out the paradox in the BN's approach now as it pits the idea of "one race" with the "divide and rule" notion which characterises the coalition.

The question is, how successful will the BN be in regaining lost support?