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BN-Challenges (News Focus)

BN STRUGGLES TO REMAIN RELEVANT AMIDST CHALLENGES

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KUALA LUMPUR, July 6 (Bernama) -- Leaders of the 13-member Barisan Nasional (BN) will touch base tomorrow to review the ruling coalition's performance in the last six decades and recommend new strategies to ensure that it remains relevant.

Bigger and more serious challenges awaits the BN as it prepares to face the next general election amidst mounting criticisms over its handling of certain issues and controversies.

Top on the agenda of the BN Convention, to be held at the Putra World Trade Centre here, will be Prime Minister and BN chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's address.

Tracing back the history of BN, the coalition started off under the name of Alliance and went on to lead Malaysia to independence on Aug 31, 1957.

Since its inception in 1952, the Alliance and now BN have won all ten general elections.

The coalition, which was operating on an ad-hoc basis with only two members, Umno and MCA, climbed the political ladder starting with the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council elections. It won nine out of the 12 seats contested.

The MIC joined the coalition in 1955 to face the Federal election to the legislative council, promising independence and racial unity.

Together, they scored a thumping victory when the Alliance won 51 out of the 52 seats contested in the July 1955 election which subsequently led to the independence of Malaya on Aug 31, 1957.

While the Alliance was born out of necessity from three major races -- Malays, Chinese and Indians to work together to fulfill the prerequisite set by the British to negotiate for the independence of Malaya, the BN came to life as the saviour of a nation on the brink of collapse of Alliance.

Following the poor performance of the Alliance in the May 1969 general election, the future of the three party coalition appeared bleaked.

This prompted the then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak to come up with the national coalition front or BN which also included political parties such as Gerakan, SUPP and PAS. (PAS left the front later).

The idea was crystallised at the UMNO general assembly in June 1972 and subsequently the BN was registered on June 1, 1974.

The mettle of this newly formed national front was put to test in the 1974 general election. The BN won the election with flying colours, securing 135 out of the 154 parliamentary seats and also gained control of all the state governments.

Currently, the BN has 13 members namely UMNO, MCA, MIC, Gerakan, People's Progressive Party, Sarawak United People Party, Sarawak Nasional Party, Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak, Parti Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu, United Pasok Kadazan Organisation, Liberal Democratic Party, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah and Sabah Progressive Party.

Initially, the BN had 14 members but it was reduced to 13 after Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat opted to dissolve last month.

Former Universiti Malaya senior lecturer, Prof Murugesu Pathmanathan once wrote that the BN occupied a unique place due to the fact that the coalition was forged before the attainment of the country's independence.

Secondly, it has been a coalition that has been closely identified with the political history of the country and thirdly, the BN coalition is

distinctive in the sense that unlike political coalitions elsewhere, it was formed prior to elections, he said.

"What is also notable about the BN has been its capacity to evolve to meet the new challenges and demands of a rapidly developing society, both in economic and social terms," he was quoted as saying in BN's 20th anniversary celebration book.

Datuk V.K Chin from The Star newspaper also wrote in 1995 that BN's success was due to its ability to bring together the Malays, Chinese, Indians and other minority groups for their common good.

"It can do this because the Barisan, since the days of the Alliance party, has always stuck to the principle that the various racial groups must be united in purpose and work for the nation's progress and growth," he said.

Former MCA vice-president Datuk Yap Pian Hon told Bernama today that BN's greater challenge now depended on economic and social factors to win the heart and minds of the people.

He said it was very critical to get the support of the people to ensure BN can continue to rule the country. "The question that remains is in what way can the BN get the support?"

"Therefore, we must settle the problems faced by the people and deliver projects to the rakyat. Let them enjoy it and spend more time to listen to the rakyat, especially when your services are needed," he said.

Yap also said the BN had to double its effort to win the support from the people since the members and supporters at the grassroots level seem to be confused with the distorted news and issues raised by the opposition.

Another veteran politician from Sarawak, Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar said the BN must accept the paradigm shift of the people and come up with programmes and plans that can continue to make the coalition relevant to the people.

"You cannot become over sensitive, otherwise people would suspect that you cannot accept criticisms. You must accept criticisms as suggestions to improve the situation, as long as it is not defamatory," he said, adding that people are now openly criticising certain policies and issues such as the Internal Security Act.

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