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BN win is all but certain

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HOW things have changed. Forty years ago, relatives, even acquaintances, who visited the Federal capital were sure to find hospitality in the homes of their KL kinsmen. It was an ancient Malay custom. And if a relative (more often the whole family) did come to KL and did not lodge with their kinfolk, the relatives felt slighted.

It's no longer so. Many now would rather stay at hotels and most relatives are relieved.

Perlis had no hotels or lodging houses three decades ago. If there were, few lodging houses were of an acceptable standard. In any event, when I visited Kangar I always stayed at the residence of the Menteri Besar.

I am glad, and no less a person than the Menteri Besar of Perlis, Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, himself assured me on this, that Perlis now does have at least one public accommodation that meets the requirements of an occasional visitor like me, or whoever cares to go to Perlis.

I have decided to visit Perlis during the final days of the Indera Kayangan state by-election to gauge for myself the effects of the September 11 tragedy, the easy defeat of the Taliban theocratic regime in Afghanistan and the MCA's continuing squabble, on domestic politics, specifically on the Chinese and Malay voters.

Indera Kayangan will be a good sample; the most up-to-date electoral roll will be used. During the November 1999 general election, the late Datuk Khor Liang Tee, who died last Wednesday, defeated Parti Keadilan Nasional candidate Ko Chu Liang with a satisfactory majority (1,974 votes), an acceptable result in the context of the very emotional 1999 general poll.

As I had predicted on November 25, it will be a straight fight between Barisan Nasional (BN) and Keadilan. It will not be altogether surprising if a Malay rather than another Malaysian is Keadilan's standard bearer.

Whatever, Indera Kayangan is a delicately balanced constituency, with almost equal numbers of Malay (47.7 per cent) and Chinese (47.2 per cent) voters, and Indians (4.8 per cent) and the others forming the balance.

Despite the MCA spat, the BN is expected to retain the seat easily. It needs only to capture half of the Malay electorate, as I expect BN will garner the majority of the non-Malay votes. I do not expect Umno will have too much difficulty in achieving the required number of Malay votes. If it does, then something is seriously amiss.

In all the polls since 1952, when they were introduced by the British, Wanita Umno (then known as Kaum Ibu) had played a crucial role. Umno and the alliance party (BN since 1974) always depended on women voters.

Puteri Umno should now make an impact in Malaysian politics. Indera Kayangan is a serious debut. It should immerse itself in the unfamiliar territory of Malay-Islamic politics.

Unlike at the Federal level, (the Parliament is bicameral) the State Assembly is unicameral. Previously, State elections were held before the Parliamentary elections until the Government, beginning 1964, decided to hold them simultaneously for two reasons.

One was that the Election Commission said that it was capable of handling the two polls simultaneously. And another reason, Tun Razak told me, was that concurrent polls tended and did provide several advantages to the incumbents simply because of the ruling party's superior organisation and huge funds.

Of course, this was not the case in Kelantan in 1964, 1969, 1990, 1995 and 1999 and in Terengganu in 1999, or when Parti Bersatu Sabah triumphed in 1985, 1990 and 1994 (shortlived).

Having been involved in elections for more than half of my years, I find that the present provisions of law relating to elections are quite adequate. Perhaps the security and safety of voters could be improved further, based on the Lunas by-election experience.

The "hate campaign based on race and religion" nearly caused racial tensions of major proportions. By-elections, like inter-house matches in boarding schools, are more keenly fought than the general election and inter-school games.

I know, because I was at MCKK for six years, and I also fought three general elections and participated in others, and many by-elections.

The BN lost Lunas, though it won in Sanggang, Teluk Kemang and Likas in Sabah. Occasionally, though I have not heard it for a long time, some Malaysians (usually opposition inclined) have advocated the Aussie model of elections in which a candidate must win an absolute majority of votes before he can be declared the victor. I opposed it then and do so now. I think the Westminster model has been a success. He or she who passes the post first wins.

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, turned 76 last Thursday. He said he was not fond of celebrating his birthday simply because the occasion only reminds him he is ageing. Previous Prime Ministers - Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Razak - (I can't recall attending Tun Hussein's birthday parties) publicly as well as privately celebrated their birthdays. I have fond memories of Tunku's and Tun Razak's birthday parties. There was much merriment, a vanished diversion.

Dr Mahathir has consolidated our advance in political development, economic growth and social evolution. He deserves the gratitude of all Malaysians, of course. But there are also many people who are openly and furtively inflamed by the way in which he wants to make his people better because his efforts threaten what they want to put in place.

The best birthday present the MCA and Umno can give Dr Mahathir is Indera Kayangan wrapped in gold paper, and presented on a silver platter. I believe the MCA and Umno can do this if they are whole-hearted.

Shahidan and others must hit hard at the opposition. Realpolitik - the desire to always win - combined with the determination to kill Keadilan rather than scotch it should spur him and his associates all the way to Putrajaya.

The debate in Kangar is now only about the means, not the end.

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