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Opposition keeps wishing for things it can't have

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I LIKE elections. I really do. I personally fought three general elections, and was involved, in one way or other, in all others except in the 1978 and 1982 polls.

In 1978, I was in my third year at Kamunting, held under the Internal Security Act (ISA), and I was reading for my Master's degree in international relations at Cambridge in 1982.

We have had 10 general elections, 11 if you include the first general election two years before independence when the Alliance Party (Barisan Nasional since 1974) won 51 out of 52 seats, its best performance to date, an all-time record which is unlikely ever to be repeated.

The extraordinary feat of the Alliance Party against the might of the British colonial Government's machination and money via its local proxies, Parti Negara (now-defunct), in particular hastened independence.

There are two sides to every election, but only one top job. In Putrajaya since last year.

Each one of the general election was different. In my case, the easiest was in 1974, which was also my first attempt.

I scored the highest percentage among the BN candidates in Kelantan (81.81 per cent voted for me) followed by Datuk Mohd Asri Muda, Pas president at Nilam Puri who obtained 74.53 per cent.

Pas then was in the BN but left it four years later, barely two years after Tun Razak died. Tun Razak had persuaded Pas to be part of the coalition.

The worst was certainly in 1990; the campaign was emotionally fraught; but the 1995 poll was a revelation. I was the director of operations for the Machang parliamentary constituency since I was the Umno leader, though not a candidate. I was my own director of operations in Machang and twice in Kok Lanas.

The then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had shown a particular interest in the Machang parliamentary constituency, perhaps I should say in the Kemuning State constituency where an Anwarist, Ismail Mamat, was contesting. He lost by 102 votes. He had 4,657 votes to Pas' Ustaz Hassan Mohamad's 4,759.

Ismail is now considered an ally of Datuk Seri Najib Razak. Anwar did not altogether surprise me when he called to ask my appraisal of the situation. After a week of campaigning, I told Anwar frankly that none in Machang (the parliamentary seat with three State seats - Pulai Chondong, Banggol Judah and Kemuning) would win. He accepted my judgement. Still, he asked me to do all I could for Ismail.

I believe, then and now, I could have done more and he would have won if Ismail had been less Machiavellian. He desperately wanted to win, albeit on his own terms. So, I obliged him.

I also said Umno would not be able to recapture Kelantan from Pas-Semangat 46 coalition. I was right, and I shall be right again in 2004 or whenever the election is held.

The Barisan Nasional Government still has slightly less than three years in office before the next poll is due.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad can be excused when he spoke irritably at the Opposition's suggestion that there might be a snap poll.

The BN, after the events of September 11 and the defeat of the Taliban,

is in reasonably good spirits and more importantly, in good stead. There are detractors, inside and outside the member parties; several of them seem likely to continue being as difficult as possible, but Dr Mahathir's standing as a successful moderate Muslim leader has soared considerably, both at home and overseas. This has not helped the Opposition. And it knows it too well.

There is no undue economic pressure on the Government, as we said in the NST editorial on Tuesday. All signs indicate that Dr Mahathir continues to command the support of the majority in the nation.

The worries of the "doubters" about Dr Mahathir's commitment against the militant Islamists have, in some ways, been eased. There are no ambiguities on this score which is comforting. Malaysians are getting the message Dr Mahathir wants to despatch. Well, I believe so.

There has been a discernible sign for the better. The Government and Umno have to catch the tide craftily and swiftly.

We still have more than 30 months before election is due, giving Umno, in particular, plenty of time to make preparations. The scale of victory in 2004 or earlier will depend on what Umno does between now and then, the external factors notwithstanding.

Next time around, Umno-led BN must not just win the poll. I hope it will have a stronger mandate for change with new direction emerging clearly.

The question before the Malaysian electorate is simple as it has always been since independence: to continue relying on practical matters and choosing whether to take the risk with the Opposition or to stick with the comforting security which the BN has always delivered. The BN, under Dr Mahathir or Pak Lah (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) personified, will always keep faith with the electorate.

An election is an important democratic process, not a trifling thing because you are given a choice to decide who will determine your future, besides spending your money.

Election is an interesting time, always has been and always will be. Snap or otherwise, it is the only time when the nation becomes the land of promise: make a mountain out of a mole hill and worse still, when speeches sound like promissory notes!

I know many politicians, one in particular, whose talent for making promises is only surpassed by his talent for not keeping them. He has lost elections, and I know he will lose again if Umno picks him again, simply because he is an Umno divisional leader or sits in the party supreme council.

Let the Opposition clamour for a snap election. It can wish it for an indefinitely long time.

Dr Mahathir is riding high. Politics is a profession where great skill is required. In dismissing a possible snap election, Dr Mahathir shows he is wiser than other people. But wise men change their minds - when they grow older and wiser.

There's nothing that cures the Opposition from wishing things (like the snap election). It keeps on wanting what it can't have. But what else is there for it to wish for?

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