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To each country, its own kind of government

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SOON a decision will be made by the chairman of the Barisan Nasional, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, on the future course of the two-year rotation system of the Chief Ministership of Sabah. Since its independence in 1963, parliamentary democracy in Sabah has undergone a more than somewhat interesting and colourful course.

In the beginning, it followed the standard parliamentary democracy practice of the leader of the majority party in the legislature being appointed Chief Minister. Indeed for years the choice of the CM was not based on racial or religious considerations. Thus, successive CMs had come from the Kadazan, Malay, Chinese and Indian communities. Sabah had truly established a tradition of multi-racial and multi-religious political parties.

In recent years, however, political parties in Sabah have been polarised into racial and religious components which contested the last two State elections resulting in the rotation system of Muslim-Bumiputera, Non-Muslim Bumiputera and Chinese CMs. Each has had its turn.

The primary objective of any political system is that there should be political stability as the foundation for socio-economic development of the country. The elements for a climate of political stability however varies from country to country.

Under the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy evolved over a period of 150 years, a two-party system is in place in the United Kingdom with either party forming the Government of the day depending on which party secures the majority in Parliament after a general election.

In the United States, the separation of powers is very real. The US is a federation like Malaysia. Under its Constitution, the States reserve the right to elect the President.

Hence, the system of each of the 50 States constituting an electoral college in a winner takes all system, where the presidential candidate who obtains the majority of the popular vote in the State gets all the electoral college votes of that State. Each State is allocated a number of votes proportionate to the population of the State.

Thus in the recent US election, Al Gore secured the majority of the popular vote nation-wide but Bush who secured the majority of the electoral college votes was elected President. Under the system, the President could belong to a party which is not the majority party in the legislatures.

Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Thailand and New Zealand have all adopted the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy more or less. The Head of State is a constitutional ruler, whether Emperor, King, President or Governor-General. The Prime Minister is Head of Government and wields real power.

Indonesia is a rather complex system. The President is both Head of State and Head of Government and is elected by Parliament which also elects the Vice-President. President Abdul Rahman Wahid is not the leader of the majority party in Parliament, neither is Vice-President Sukarnoputri's party.

Indonesia's third President, B.J. Habibie, had proposed that in future, Indonesian Presidents should be directly elected by the people which will vest in the presidency a real mandate to govern the country.

In the Philippines, the President and Vice-President are directly and

separately elected by the people unlike the US system of presidential candidates with a running-mate for Vice-President although the political system of the Philippines otherwise follows closely the US system. Thus Joseph Estrada and Gloria Arroyo belong to different political parties.

In the Lebanon, the office of President is reserved for a Christian and that of Prime Minister for a Muslim as the country is divided between Christians and Muslims although ethnically they are the same, much the same as in Northern Ireland where it is between Catholics and Protestants.

To achieve political stability, therefore, each country has to devise its own political system for a variety of reasons. It is abundantly clear, however, that a proven political system in one country cannot be transplanted to another country. In countries with a multi-religious and multi-racial population, the political system of State governance can assume myriad forms and style but remain democratic nonetheless.

Under the Federal Constitution, Malaysia has adopted the Westminster model. Up to now, successive Federal Governments since independence have faithfully followed the British system.

So too have the State Governments, except Penang and Sabah. In Penang, the Gerakan Party of the Chief Minister is not the majority party in the State Legislature. Political compromise and power-sharing policies of the Barisan Nasional have made this exception possible.

Over the years, the political climate in Malaysia has been subject to change and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. This need not necessarily be cause for much anxiety for so long as political wisdom and sensitivity to current trends, reflective of the people, are borne in mind to sustain political stability.

Sabah, the land below the wind, could well be the harbinger of the winds of political change for the rest of the country.

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