

03/10/2002

On the threshold of a new political culture

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed recently announced to his constituents in Kubang Pasu that he will not be standing for re-election at the next general election. The announcement follows the PM's earlier announcement at the last Umno General Assembly that he was retiring from active politics.

The next general election is not due until 2004 although under our system of parliamentary democracy the PM can call an election any time before the expiry of Parliament's five-year term. Since then we have been told that the PM will not retire until after the OIC meeting in Kuala Lumpur in October 2003.

The PM's Kubang Pasu announcement is of special interest in that an incumbent MP is announcing his retirement well before the next general election. This is the common practice of MPs in the older parliamentary democracies of the Commonwealth.

In such countries it is a tradition, even a convention for incumbents of parliament to announce their intended retirement early so that the political party of the incumbent can choose a prospective candidate for the next election.

Such a step will enable the party and the prospective candidate to nurse the constituency.

The prospective candidate is given time to familiarise himself with the constituency and the electorate by taking an active part in the political, economic and social life of the constituency.

Indeed, it is the common practice for other political parties eyeing the constituency to introduce their prospective candidates, thus giving the electorate a fair opportunity to elect the best candidate to represent the constituency.

Dr Mahathir is well known for providing leadership by example. The question is whether he is setting a new trend in our political culture.

After nearly half-a-century of parliamentary democracy it has been extremely rare for an incumbent MP to announce his intended retirement.

The assumption is that he will carry on regardless of age or longevity of service.

Candidates are closely-guarded secrets until the eve of nomination day and often on nomination day itself.

Sometimes surprise candidates are sprung on the electorate on nomination day. Perhaps our old traditions have something to do with our political culture like an arranged marriage between two completely unknown individuals with love between them evolving afterwards.

In adopting the Westminster style of parliamentary democracy we have not actually followed the origins of the system where the electorate votes for the candidate and not the political party.

The popularity of the candidate determines the choice. Hence there are independent candidates who can win elections. Also MPs can switch political parties mid-stream.

Malaysians vote for the party and not the individual candidate so much so that the personality of the candidate is almost irrelevant. The popularity and public acceptance of the political party overrides the popularity or otherwise of the individual candidate.

However, even the best-organised political party can lose an election because of the wrong choice of candidate despite the otherwise

overwhelming support for the political party with the rival candidate winning as a form of protest vote. Over the years, Malaysian politics have been subject to this dilemma of choice by the voter between party and candidate.

The starting point must surely be how political parties are managed in the first place to produce acceptable candidates.

Basic democracy is synonymous with elections which are nurtured by party elections.

In the beginning, all posts in a political party were elective at branch, division, state and national levels. These party elections were held annually. Now political parties hold triennial elections to reduce politicking within the party and to establish a degree of continuity and stability.

There is growing resentment, however, against retaining existing leaders by the expedient of holding no-contest elections. Such a trend demoralises aspiring politicians and is considered a denial of democratic rights.

Worse, if previously elective posts are now made appointed posts by the top leadership. It will deprive the party of the support at the grassroots.

Contested elections at party level will, in fact, strengthen the party. It will demonstrate to the public that the political party is truly democratic.

Such elections keep the party regularly rejuvenated with the infusion of new blood with new ideas and a sense of purpose.

The process eliminates the patronage culture which has been the cause of the collapse of once powerful political parties despite being in power for decades.

With the example set by Dr Mahathir we may well be on the threshold of a new political culture.