

23 MAR 2004
Election-Australia
AUSSIE NEWSPAPER HAILS ABDULLAH'S VICTORY

MELBOURNE, March 23 (Bernama) -- Malaysians voted for economic growth, social stability and political choice and in the process renounced religious fundamentalism, 'The Australian' newspaper said in an editorial.

It said it was a personal triumph for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, who after just five months in office has received a ringing endorsement for his reform programme.

"And they are very good news for everybody who understands that democracy is the best antidote to the Islamic fundamentalism that fosters political terrorism," the editorial said.

"The governing Barisan Nasional coalition has won a thumping majority in the national parliament. And in state polls the Islamicist PAS party lost one, and just held on in the other of the two states it governed."

The newspapers told its readers that Malaysian elections "are free and fair, the ballot boxes are not stuffed and while opposition parties may not get much of a run in the national media, they can campaign hard". And voters had access to all the information they need to make their own judgments.

"In the 1999 general election the government of long-serving Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad was given a fright when a majority of ethnic Malay voters, its core constituency, deserted to the Islamic religious opposition party in some states," the newspaper said.

"But, this time, Malay electors responded to Mr Abdullah's crackdown on corruption by voting the Government back into an unassailable parliamentary position.

"They were joined by Indian and Chinese voters, happy to support a coalition dominated by Mr Abdullah's United Malays National Organisation, rather than PAS, which ran less on a political than religious platform.

"In the states it controlled, PAS imposed a fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran on all citizens. The party advocated a

criminal
law the Taliban would welcome, including execution by stoning for
criminals.

"And one of its spiritual leaders warned Muslims that while
heaven
awaited its supporters, people who voted for other parties were
hell-bound.
In place of such zealotry, Malaysians have returned a Government
that has
tripled incomes and reduced poverty levels from a third of all
households
in 1982 to just 5 per cent now, and which does not emphasise the
role of
religion in public life.

"Perhaps in their enthusiasm for stability rather than religious
extremism, the voters got carried away. Democracies work best when
governments face strong oppositions and a prime minister with close
to 200
of the 219 seats in the national parliament, as Mr Abdullah has, is
hardly
under pressure.

"But the immutable fact is that the people have voted for
economic
growth, social stability and political choice. And in doing so they
have
renounced religious fundamentalism," the editorial concluded.

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