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To the ballot box, Malaysia!

THE nation is now officially in the run-up to the general election of 2004, the 11th in Malaysia's independent history, and the first for the administration of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

After five general elections under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, this year's exercise marks a watershed. Hence, the thrum of excitement underlying this moment. Not since 1982, when Dr Mahathir went to the people for his first mandate, and received it in resounding measure, has there been such an expectant atmosphere over the polls.

This will not be a recession election as in 1986, nor a divided election as in 1990, nor a monied election as in 1995, nor a crisis election as in 1999. At each of those electoral outings, there were threats to be forestalled.

Much less so now. Abdullah has done remarkably well in suffusing the nation with his optimism, goodwill, impeccable principles and simple love for the country and people. This, as 22 years ago, will be an election of hope and promise.

The new Prime Minister is seeking a mandate for an expanded national agenda. The targets of Vision 2020 are enshrined in his thinking, but he sees a wider interactivity between Malaysia and the world as part of this process. The economy must drive Malaysia forward; the private sector must fuel it, and the civil service support it.

Above all, that generation of Malaysians for whom Abdullah is only the second PM they have ever known must be seen as determining what is to come thereafter. As in 1982, this general election, too, will be a debutante's ball for first-time voters.

That Malaysia has never missed a scheduled general election testifies to how much this fundamental aspect of our democracy is cherished.

That we now have 219 parliamentary seats to be filled by ballot - almost half as many for our 25 million people as India has for its billion - indicates the importance Malaysia ascribes to representation.

Every four or five years, this nation stands before itself and takes this all-important measure of our self-governance. Of course, democracy is not an exercise performed once every four-to-five years. It is an ongoing process.

Democracy is exercised all the time, in how society and its institutions function, and in the attitudes of all Malaysians towards what Malaysia is and how it works - which is to say, towards who we truly are.

Or at least, who Malaysia's 10.4 million registered voters are. This must be borne in mind as Malaysia comes in for a landing on Election Day. Fewer than half the nation's 25 million citizens have the right to decide the future for all. As a 75 per cent turnout at the polls is considered good, the number of decision-makers is whittled down to under eight million - just a third of the nation.

Therefore, the recalcitrant two million who do not vote must take heed that their right to do so is the most precious in any democracy, and that not every citizen has this right. Therefore, it is not just their right but their obligation to vote, and to do so responsibly, as an act of personal conscience in deciding what they would wish to make of Malaysia. The nation that grants them this right - this privilege - deserves this much in return.