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BN must make the tough decisions

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THE results of Malaysia's 11th general election are emphatic: an overwhelming vote of confidence in the gentle but firm leadership of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Commentators have said - privately at least - that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad would never have got such a verdict if he had been the leader.

Which brings me to the point that political parties have the sometimes dichotomous task of having to be popular enough to win elections and to form governments at five-year intervals, yet be forceful enough in the intervening years to push for reforms and to implement the vision of its leaders, acts that will involve social dislocation of some sort and therefore be potentially unpopular, at least in the eyes of the minority who may be affected by such acts.

Dr Mahathir's 22-year administration illustrated this idea well. Barisan Nasional's popularity - among the educated middle-class at least - suffered from the effects of events such as Operation Lallang, the crisis in the judiciary and the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Despite this (and some would say because of it), the nation prospered. The impression one got of Dr Mahathir was of a man in a hurry who wanted to just get on with running the country and fulfilling his vision of Malaysia, a man who was increasingly aware of the quickening flow of the sands of time through his fingers.

He said in 1999: "I must be the only dictator in history to have to win an election before I can start dictating", but I am sure he was only half joking.

It was almost as though winning elections was a necessary distraction from the real job of running Malaysia.

Which brings me to my point. The almost unequivocal support of the electorate is not an end unto itself.

The Government formed by the victorious Barisan Nasional must have the conviction of its own beliefs to make hard but right decisions - decisions that may even be unpopular. Medicine is almost always bitter, and we should do well to take a leaf out of the good doctor's book.

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