

01/03/2004

It's a referendum on PM

Brendan Pereira

IT'S a referendum on PM IT'S a no-brainer.

The coming election will be a referendum on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's first few months in office and the path he has chosen for Malaysia. Sure, the quality of candidates will matter, as will the question of how well the Barisan Nasional machinery responds to the bread-and-butter issues on the ground.

But after nomination day, there will be no mistaking the ruling coalition's main selling point. Posters of the PM will flood the constituencies and media campaigns at the national level are likely to centre around him, his policy initiatives, his religious credentials and his promise to preserve one-system rule for Muslims and non-Muslims. Already slogans are being coined around the traits the public associates with the PM: trustworthiness and hope.

A government official told the New Straits Times: "There is little doubt that the PM's first few months in office has caught the imagination of many. He will be the centrepiece of the elections, without a doubt.

"We are certain that he can carry the elections."

Since taking over the top job from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Oct 31, Abdullah has won many admirers with his pledge to purge the system of its excesses, encourage transparency in the award of government contracts, improve the delivery of public services, and his concern for the small man.

The reservoir of goodwill has continued to build up in recent weeks with the setting up of a Royal Commission on the police and the arrest and prosecution of former Perwaja Steel boss Tan Sri Eric Chia and former cabinet minister Kasitah Gaddam for alleged corruption.

Former minister Datuk Shahrir Samad said: "Abdullah has walked into the room and opened all the windows. The people are excited about the possibilities that his administration offers. I believe that most voters will view the election as a referendum on the PM. I expect this strategy to be successful."

The ruling coalition is not moving into unfamiliar territory by banking on the popularity of one man to ensure its electoral success. In 1995, the Barisan Nasional romped home to its best performance since Independence on the back of widespread affection for Dr Mahathir. More significantly, the former PM also led the ruling coalition to a strong showing in his first election as the leader of Malaysia in 1982.

On the strength of his "Clean, Efficient and Trustworthy" campaign and the feel-good factor surrounding the Mahathir administration, the BN obtained 60.54 per cent of the votes. Various surveys by several public universities and anecdotal evidence suggest that the BN will obtain redemption for its 1999 nightmare, where Pas and the Opposition carved out territory previously owned by the ruling coalition.

Even Pas believes that it will not continue to sweep forward. It predicts that it can hold on to Kelantan and Terengganu but will lose more state seats to Umno in both east coast states. The conservative Islamic party also believes that it will win a maximum of 23 parliamentary seats, down from the 27 in 1999.

The Opposition says that the shortage of one combustible issue like the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and the feel-good factor accompanying the Abdullah administration may blunt its electoral performance.

Still, they believe that the plan to make the election a referendum on the PM can be exploited.

Pas' election strategy is clear: To paint Abdullah as no different from other Umno leaders who have gone before him. They will contend that his clean-up of the system is merely cosmetic.

The party's backroom boys are busy preparing a campaign to smear the PM.

Dr Dzulkifli Ahmad, head of the Pas think-tank, said: "There will be no let-up against the PM during the elections. He is also only one man. Our argument is that one man will be changed by the system and not the other way around."

Associate Professor Maznah Mohamed of Universiti Sains Malaysia disagrees.

She says that most people associate the reform happening in Umno and the administration with one man.

"This is the reform that the people have been waiting for," she adds.

This is the sentiment that those cobbling together Barisan Nasional's election strategy want to mine.

A government official notes that while there is a robust feel-good factor about the PM, there is also cynicism on the ground on how much change can be brought about by one person.

"We want to ask the people to empower the PM so that he can empower Malaysians," he adds.