

24/03/2004

## Forum pin-points the challenges facing BN Government

Aniza Damis

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Now that the elections are over, it's time to get to work, said Tan Sri Musa Hitam and two other panelists at a post-election forum today.

Having been given the people's mandate to rule for another five years, the focus should move from celebration to pin-pointing the challenges that face the Barisan Nasional government.

Among the issues raised at the Institute for Strategic and International Studies' (ISIS) National Affairs Forum on "Malaysia's 11th General Election: What happened? So what?" at the ISIS headquarters, here, were that of transparency and good governance, reducing the budget deficit and repairing foreign relations.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's 10-point agenda, which include fighting corruption and ensuring good governance, must be given serious attention early enough if the BN wants to retain the people's faith.

Musa said the Prime Minister's vision of a change in government and administrative culture would go down well with the multiracial middle class, who were highly educated, fiercely independent, yet highly demanding.

"The middle class demands good governance. It wants to progress forward, not backwards. And it wants a leadership that will not insult their intelligence," Musa said.

They are apolitical who preferred to sit back and observe, and impose their will when the need arose. It was this category of middle class voters that rejected the Barisan Nasional in the 1999 elections.

Many of them were disenchanted and became "refugees", supported the opposition because of what they perceived BN to be. But they came back in Sunday's elections.

Musa added that the "Pak Lah factor", his style and "sajian" (presentation) that had been beautifully crafted - his considerate and gentle diplomatic ways - went down well with everyone, including the youth and Puteri.

Abdullah's style was also in contrast to the approach that had been adopted by his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The challenge now is to deliver on the promises and manage on the huge success.

"Otherwise, the people will become cynical and react at the next general election. Then, the BN won't get a strong mandate," said Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) commissioner Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam.

Meritocracy, an issue which has risen in the last few years, has to be seen to be implemented, stressed Navaratnam. He added that there is need for a more reasonable and equitable national development policy.

Navaratnam, former deputy secretary-general of the Finance Ministry, pointed out that the landslide victory would raise Malaysia's economic profile among the business and financial community.

ISIS chairman and chief executive officer Tan Sri Noordin Sopiee, who presented an analysis of how and why the BN won the elections, said Pas, in reaction to their resounding loss, was likely to fully galvanise themselves.

Pas would either try to out-Umno Umno or focus on its best selling point. Either way, Noordin felt that "Pas will decide on its vision and will be there at the next election."

Among those who attended the half-day forum were academics, NGOs, politicians, senior civil servants, corporate figures, as well as members of the diplomatic corps.