

19/03/2004

Possibility of low voter turnout worrying leaders

Brendan Pereira

THERE is one issue that keeps senior Barisan Nasional leaders awake at night these days - the possibility of a low voter turnout on March 21.

They believe that if 80 per cent of the 10.3 million Malaysians head to the polling booth, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi should get the strong mandate he seeks.

After all, survey after survey commissioned by newspapers and even the Opposition show that the PM's raft of measures to tackle corruption, improve the delivery of services to the public and remake Malaysia has gone down very well on the ground.

Even in wood-panelled offices around the capital, where the cynicism of the professional class resides, there is a growing belief that Abdullah deserves the benefit of doubt.

So why lose sleep?

Because too much good news can sometimes have the opposite effect.

Many people believe that BN will swat the Opposition like flies and win hands-down. In some ruling coalition operations rooms around the country, there is already a celebratory air.

In this backdrop, there is concern that the member of that nebulous group called the silent majority may feel less compelled to leave his couch and vote on Sunday. In his mind, his one vote will have little value in altering the outcome of the polls.

There is one problem with this scenario - the election is not a walk-over. It never was. As popular as Abdullah is, he is leading the BN into battle against formidable opponents. Pas controls two States and wants to own larger swathes of the Malay belt.

The Islamic conservative party is like a virus that mutates, its politicians are not easily put down or discouraged from achieving their goal of setting up an Islamic state.

Any party whose supporters and volunteers leave their families for two weeks, sleep on mats, eat on the run and work the ground like there is no tomorrow, is not planning to lose without a fight.

Be assured that every BN candidate who emerges triumphantly on March 21 against Pas will have known that he was in a scrap.

Much is at stake. Abdullah laid it out in Seberang Jaya on Wednesday, saying that the single most important issue in the election is the attitude of Muslims toward religion.

"Sometimes what Pas is saying is an insult to the intelligence of the Malays but it still appeals to them. This is the single, most important challenge: the mindset of the Malays and how they view Islam."

Generally, Malaysians are conscientious voters.

In Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's first election as PM in 1982, about 75 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote. The BN received 60.54 per cent of the national vote.

Four years later, 69.9 per cent voted, and the coalition received 57 per cent of the vote.

In 1990, 73 per cent voted, giving BN 54 per cent of the vote.

Five years later, 72 per cent turned out to vote. That was the election which gave the BN its best showing ever - 65 per cent of the popular vote went to Dr Mahathir.

The number of Malaysians who voted in 1999 dropped to 71 per cent. BN's share of the vote also fell to 56.5 per cent.

Even before Parliament was dissolved, ruling coalition officials identified getting more people to vote as a critical task. They hoped to tap the reservoir of goodwill and hope that Abdullah has brought in his four months in office.

Radio and television commercials and direct mailing campaigns were designed to make people feel energised about casting their vote.

This campaign is likely to be cranked up in the last 48 hours before election day. Datuk Shaziman Abu Mansor, the Tampin BN candidate, is not leaving anything to chance.

He spent yesterday making sure that his supporters and BN members would use their cars and buses to ferry voters from their homes to the polling centres. That is one way of improving voter turnout.