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`Three Cs best bet for our future'

By Chok Suat Ling

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The Barisan Nasional's model of consultation, compromise and consensus - the most important factor in the country's uninterrupted governance since Independence - remains the best bet Malaysia has on the future, said the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad today.

"Our model works and has worked for nearly 50 years. For a multi-racial country that spurns assimilation, the Three Cs are the only way to go. This is one continuity that all Malaysians would probably want to see."

While acknowledging that there would be changes, Abdullah felt there were some things Malaysians would wish to retain, no matter what changes came their way.

In this context, he predicted that the next general election, which must be held on or before November next year, would result in another emphatic victory for the Barisan Nasional, with about three-quarters of parliamentary seats. "Terengganu is not a sure bet for Pas, although Kelantan probably is. However, with the new election rules and delineation of boundaries, it is possible that the BN may win a few seats in Kelantan."

"Pas victory in Terengganu in 1999 was largely a protest vote and the objects of that protest are being addressed. If Terengganu Umno puts up new candidates of high calibre, BN will stand a good chance of winning," he said in his talk on Malaysia's political outlook at the Malaysia Strategic Outlook 2003 Conference organised by the Asian Strategic and Leadership Institute at the Prince Hotel.

As Abdullah was attending a memorial service for former prime minister Tun Abdul Razak, his speech was delivered by NST assistant opinion editor Rozi Ali.

He said in Kedah, Perlis and, to a certain extent, Pahang, Pas might still hope for inroads at the next election, but he believed they would be "shown the backroads" instead as more voters recognise that the mainstream in Malaysia was "a good and useful place to be; certainly a better place than anywhere Pas can take this country".

Describing the DAP as "a gone case", Abdullah said it could perhaps still serve some use in almost the same way as an NGO.

"But when it comes to defending Chinese-community imperatives, I don't see that the BN's own Chinese-based components lack spirit and resolve."

On leadership transitions, Abdullah said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement in October had been the single most influential factor in the political out-look over the past year.

"But when Dr Mahathir goes, there should be reason neither to cheer nor to weep. The Prime Minister's retirement will not spell the end of Umno, as the transition of top office to his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has progressed more smoothly than relations with any of Dr Mahathir's three earlier deputies in the past." Umno, he said, was generally satisfied with the present succession and there were few apprehensions in the party at this stage.

"Umno has done well since the 1999 general election. The (former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim factor will probably not play a very big part in the next election, nor in the subsequent administration. Still, let us not underestimate Anwar or any factor as in politics, anything is possible."

Saying that the MCA was also in the process of its own leadership transition, Abdullah was confident it would not pose problems. "And the MIC too might be considering a leadership transition though not likely in the foreseeable future. Gerakan will remain in the status quo for some time." According to Abdullah, these transitions might seem more fraught with acrimony than they were but experience had shown that even when leadership challenges were bitter and hard fought, the ruling parties seemed to have a way of "not throwing out the baby with the bathwater".

"No one is a man for all seasons, and if making way for replacements and successors is an occasion for crisis and uncertainty, then we have not done well at all in maturing our party-political process."

Abdullah believed that, barring external circumstances, the principal ruling parties and their coalition would be intact as ever and better equipped for the future "when the sound and fury was done and the dust has settled. The Opposition, however, would hope to see opportunity in the present transitions. I think it will be disappointed."

According to Abdullah, Dr Mahathir was leaving four principal challenges for his successor - the return of English language to education; the return of meritocracy; the multi-racial ideal; and the containment of religious extremism, fanaticism and racial chauvinism.

"Not a minor list for Abdullah to implement or carry forward, but what has been established is the feasibility and importance of these goals. The methodology may change, but the directions have been agreed upon and set. What we want to achieve is stated. How we will achieve it will be up to future administrators."

On change, Abdullah felt there would certainly be a new style and tone to political leadership.

"The emphases may be different. Abdullah is not Dr Mahathir. There can never be another Dr Mahathir. At the same time, comparisons of Abdullah and Dr Mahathir do justice to neither man.

"Perhaps, after 23 years of the Mahathir administration, it would do the country good to have a change of pace at the top. However, those who think Abdullah would be deficient or lacking as a Prime Minister and president of Umno are very wrong. They would be best advised not to test him, or they too will be holding handkerchiefs to their bloody noses."

Abdullah surmised that there would be changes across the board, and through the rank and file of the public sector and corporate Malaysia with new managers - younger and better trained - rising to the helm of Malaysia Incorporated.

"We should be seeing new blood in politics too. In Umno, the Youth and Puteri wings seem up to their role of nurturing new leadership.

"Umno's BN partners are also, to greater or lesser degrees, finding the fresh new talent to carry on the national struggle."

Malaysia, said Abdullah, would continue to manage transition and change for the sake of continuity of the things that mattered most to the people - peace, prosperity, stability and security.

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