

05/06/2003

No room for apathy in fledgling democracies

Harun Hashim

IT can now be said with a degree of certainty that the next general election will be held after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad retires as prime minister in October.

The last general election was held in November 1999 and the present Parliament has a long way to go before the expiry of its five-year term. Being a parliamentary democracy, however, the prime minister of the day can call for a snap election at any time before the expiry of the Parliamentary term.

Since Independence, changes in the prime ministership have always occurred in mid-stream.

The succeeding PM has always given himself time to consolidate his political position before calling a general election so that he is returned to power on his own merit and electoral support.

We have been fortunate that we have always had a smooth changeover of government at the Federal level.

On every previous occasion, the deputy prime minister of the day traditionally has taken over from the outgoing prime minister in an Umno predetermined succession of power.

Be that as it may, on all counts the next general election is a long way off but political parties have already sounded the battle cry as if the election is just around the corner.

Political tactics are the reason for this fervour. It all began when Umno decided to postpone its triennial party election due this year to after the general election so that its party members stand united for the forthcoming election.

Indeed, the recent changes in the MCA leadership is also in preparation for the next election. After more than three years of internal party factionalism and strife, the MCA has finally settled its leadership crisis with the resignations of Datuk Dr Seri Ling Liong Sik as party president and Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek as deputy president.

The most effective method of determining party leadership is by holding party elections at all levels.

Credit must be given to the MIC which held its triennial elections recently and can justifiably claim to be a truly democratic political party. Its candidates for the general election are thus assured of party support with ample time to prepare for the general election.

Umno has called upon its Pemuda and Puteri wings to concentrate on recruiting new members to strengthen the party following.

There can be no doubt that every political party needs a constant infusion of new blood if the party is to remain relevant.

It is, however, a source of grave concern when it is revealed that 1.6 million eligible voters in the 21-30 age group have not registered as voters.

As it is, voter turnout percentage wise at every election is decreasing. Coincidentally, this is a worldwide phenomenon of the established democracies due to public apathy of politicians and politics. But we are a fledgling parliamentary democracy.

The question arises if we have reached the point that the younger generation is just not interested in politics.

Earlier generations in many countries have fought hard for the right to vote. Even today, citizens in several countries have yet to be given the

right to vote. All that needs to be done here is to register at the nearest post office in order to exercise the right to vote.

When there is a situation of apathy in politics and outright neglect of not performing the civic responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy, it calls for an examination of the causes.

Are the youth of today only interested in making money and having a good time? Or is our education system to blame for this lack of civic mindedness?

University students who are eligible to vote are told to keep out of partisan politics and to concentrate on their studies until they graduate.

This ruling is not particularly objectionable because it can easily lead to too active participation in partisan politics on campus at the expense of scholarship.

University students, however, who are frequently reminded that they are the future leaders of the country should be exposed to politics as part of general knowledge and university education by at least listening to and discussing openly with leaders of the political parties to enable them to form an independent opinion and understanding of Malaysian politics. Democracy has to be nurtured and cannot be expected to blossom overnight.

There is much more at stake in the next general election than meets the eye.