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Time is of the essence when it comes to politics

Harun Hashim

IN politics, time is an important factor. One has to be in constant readiness for a general election. This is particularly so with our system of parliamentary democracy where the prime minister can call for a snap election at any time.

In view of the impending retirement of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister in October, the next general election may be in March 2004. It is not surprising, therefore, that political parties have, in recent weeks, launched their political strategies.

Of immediate concern must surely be to get new voters on to the electoral list, the earlier the better so that first-time voters can be identified for political party support. All political parties should take an active part in this endeavour. The Election Commission has done all it can to facilitate voter registration.

The number of potential new voters is very significant and if all of them are registered, the voting trend can change quite dramatically, particularly in marginal constituencies.

While political parties are assured of votes by the party faithful, at every election, there will always be about 40 per cent floating voters whose votes can swing either way.

Next, the choice of candidates is crucial. Every party will nominate a candidate who has a good chance of winning, the effectiveness of the party machine notwithstanding.

For years, the Barisan Nasional and its predecessor, the Alliance Party has allocated seats more or less on some sort of a quota basis.

The system has worked well for the BN despite the fact that in many constituencies the candidates are not of the same racial origin as the racial majority of the constituency.

In the 1999 general election, most constituencies saw straight fights because of an election pact between the opposition political parties to avoid multi-party contests.

We may yet see this happening again for a keenly fought election.

For the next general election, several parties have announced significant changes in the line-up, whereby a majority of the incumbents will not be retained to make way for new faces. This is a healthy sign to invigorate further the political system.

Such changes, however, should take into account an important aspect of our constitutional structure. Malaysia is a federal system with Federal and State Governments. We need effective governments at both levels. To ensure such effectiveness we need experienced legislators and political leaders at both levels.

Most political parties have youth wings. For example, Umno has Pemuda Umno and Puteri Umno. This affords young party members the opportunity to acquire political experience.

An obvious start for young members is to contest for state legislative assembly seats and after gaining experience of state governments to subsequently enter the Dewan Rakyat and become national leaders.

The method of choice of election candidates is crucial for success. Basically, a candidate must command local support. It follows that the candidate should be chosen by the local division of the party.

In practice, however, the division submits a list of two or three candidates for final selection by party elders.

At the next election, the final choice should be made by a committee of the party at state level for candidates for the state legislature and by the supreme council for candidates to the Dewan Rakyat to ensure more effective administration.

Our political system is more than somewhat of a mix of a democracy and a republic. It is a democracy because MPs are elected by the people and the ministers are appointed from members of Parliament.

In a republic, the president is elected by the people and ministers are appointed by the president from persons who are not members of parliament.

In practice, members of the Dewan Rakyat are actually chosen by the party president who becomes prime minister and in the process the choice is made with potential cabinet members in mind which is a practice akin to a republic.

However, we are not a republic but a constitutional monarchy.

As part of our political development, candidates for the Dewan Rakyat should be chosen by the grassroots and potential cabinet members be chosen by the party president from the party list for proportional representation of political party representation.

Such a dual system will not only further promote democracy but at the same time provide for a strong executive and thus political stability.

Time is running out for our politicians in their preparations for the next election.

They should remember in politics time can be overtaken by events because there is many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip.