

Don't expect BN to lose big
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When Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was running for prime minister in 1996, he was blessed by Thailand's most revered monk with, yes, a whack over the head with a rolled-up newspaper. MCPX

He won. So when the country was hit by the Asian financial tsunami a year later and his government jolted by angry street protests, Chavalit used his lucky number five to carry out a crucial cabinet shake-up.

His revamped cabinet was announced at 15.05 on Aug 15 - five new ministers were named, five sacked and five swapped posts.

It didn't work. A month later, Chavalit quit.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, whose official car's number is 13, may not be as superstitious as Chavalit. However, one can't help but wonder, particularly when Parliament was dissolved on Feb 13 and the campaign period set for 13 days.

Still, no one expects Abdullah to be smacked over the head with, say, a rolled-up Utusan Malaysia.

That Abdullah will emerge victorious on March 8 is beyond doubt. The only uncertainty is the magnitude of his triumph.

The palpable winds of change which Malaysia has witnessed over the past few months may have got some talking about the Barisan Nasional losing big. That's not going to happen. Here's why.

EC's magic formula

Look at the statistics. It is very difficult, impossible even, for the opposition to win the 75 parliamentary seats necessary to deny BN its cherished two-thirds majority, let alone win government.

There will have to be a major swing in votes - and it must be across the board - before we see a sizable number of seats falling into opposition hands.

This is not going to happen. The Election Commission has over the years slashed the number of single-race majority seats and increased mixed-race ones where the ruling coalition has a distinct advantage over the motley group of opposition parties.

Indeed, it's ironic that the opposition parties - all non-racial on paper - won seats in overwhelmingly single-race constituencies in the 2004 elections.

Each of the 12 existing DAP seats have a more than 70 percent Chinese-majority electorate. At the other end of the racial spectrum, the seven PAS seats have a similar proportion of Malay voters.

In contrast, BN snapped up almost every single one of the 100-odd mixed seats. The one exception was PKR's sole seat of Permatang Pauh, where Malay voters are a shade below 70 percent.

So without a swing involving all ethnic groups - both Malays and non-Malays - the opposition will not get the 75 seats they seek.

In recent elections, a swing among Malays had not been followed by a similar swing among non-Malays and vice versa. The nature of racial politics is such that if non-Malays turn against the government, this trend is used to spook the Malays.

Cheating already done

The EC has argued that our electoral process is as transparent as the plastic ballot boxes it is bringing in for this election. True, it has introduced a few new measures, but really, the cheating has already been done before polling day.

EC's electoral boundaries have been drawn and redrawn over the past five decades to favour the ruling coalition. This is further refined and re-calibrated every few years. Put simply, the goalpost is moved at every election by the umpire himself, no less. This iniquity has been raised time and again.

Moreover, there's the issue of postal ballots - a 200,000-strong army of 'reserve voters' whose pre-marked ballots the EC can deploy, almost at will, for marginal seats to tilt the balance in BN's favour.

And we are not even talking about the 3Ms - BN's monopoly on the media, money and machinery.

Yesterday's shock reversal by the EC to cancel the use of indelible ink after much song and dance raises even more questions about the commission's role.

Given this, don't expect the opposition to win big. But the current ugly mood against the government should enable the opposition to double its haul - to about 40 seats. While this is short of its 'deny two-thirds majority' target, it will nonetheless mean a stronger opposition in Parliament.

The general election is an important part of our democracy. But it's not a be-all and end-all.

Our leaders are fond of claiming that once elected, they have the mandate to do whatever they wish. Wrong. Voters do not give them a blank cheque every four years.

Which is why we also need a vibrant civil society and an independent media. We have seen what both can do in recent years. Without these two pillars of democracy, there would be no talk of, among others, reforms for the police force and judiciary.

But for democracy to function properly, we also need the third pillar - a strong opposition. And if Malaysians cannot understand that, they should be whacked over the head.

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