

Dr M: Chinese votes in BN's bag as long as business chances exist
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 14 — Economic stability and chances for business growth are valued by Chinese Malaysians and they will support the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) at the polls so long these are not at risk, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in an interview published today.

Ahead of the 13th general elections, surveys and analyses by pundits have flagged the Chinese — who make up about 30 per cent of multiracial Malaysia's 13.3 million electorate — as opposition supporters, contrary to the former prime minister's view.

"I think the Chinese would still value their opportunities in business. If you take an environment where they can succeed in business, they would be supportive of BN, which they did even when the BN introduced the New Economic Policy," Dr Mahathir was quoted saying in the New Sunday Times.

"The NEP has in fact, benefitted the Chinese more than the Malays," he added, referring to the controversial national affirmative action policy introduced in 1971 by second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, that aimed to close the economic gap between the Malays who were largely small-time farmers and Chinese who were into businesses.

Officially, NEP was ended in 1990 but its fundamental idea remains in effect through other governmental policies. Critics have argued that the NEP has only helped the few with close ties to the ruling elite.

Dr Mahathir (picture) also acknowledged that without the NEP, Southeast Asia's third-largest economy would likely develop at a much faster rate than at present due to the dynamism of the Chinese community.

"(But) it would be an unhealthy growth," he said.

He pointed that the lopsided distribution of wealth between the races would be sharpened if the government had not taken action, and that the social imbalance would stir unrest.

"The Chinese would be rich and the Malays would be poor. And that would lead to instability," he said.

The 87-year-old who ran Malaysia for 22 years until his resignation from office in October 2003 said he still believed his socio-economic policies have been "fair".

"I keep on telling people that in this country no one should feel extremely happy because if they feel happy, if one race feels happy, it means you are doing the wrong thing. You are helping that race too much.

"The thing is you have to deny everyone something that they think they are entitled to. So they will all be unhappy, which means we are treating everyone equally," he said.

The former Umno president who is now Perkasa advisor defended his patronage of the right-wing Malay organisation whom many Chinese appear to view dimly as being racist.

"We cannot reject them as being non-Umno. We have to work with them. Otherwise, Umno will be a tiny organisation quite unable to get either Chinese or Malay support," he said.

He added that he was unsure what role the group will play after May 5, but insisted that Perkasa backed not just Umno, the Malay component in the 13-party BN coalition but the other racial components as well.

Dr Mahathir has been engaging in a tit-for-tat verbal battle against his political foe in the DAP, Lim Kit Siang since the opposition leader announced he was gunning for Gelang Patah, a Chinese-majority federal seat in Umno's JOhor home turf.

Lim, who has repeatedly sparred with Dr Mahathir in Parliament, has also been backing the Umno veteran's ex-deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, with whom he is now politically-friendly to be Malaysia's next leader.

In his interview today, Dr Mahathir described his former right-hand man as a very smart man, very charismatic, and with the ability to get along with many people of diverse backgrounds.

"He is a fantastic man, a fantastic man!" he said, but the compliment was backhanded.

"In a way, he is a chameleon. His colours turn to suit the environment he is in."

As a former boss, Dr Mahathir said Anwar had been friendly with Jews but was able to give off the image of a "Muslim zealot and remain acceptable to European liberals."

Dr Mahathir had named Anwar as his third deputy prime minister in his 22-year administration, said the opposition leader had a shot of succeeding him as prime minister.

"The main reason he lost the chance was because of his character. That, I would not accept," he said.

Dr Mahathir has emerged in recent weeks as the BN's most visible campaigner, apart from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

He has been expounding on the BN's tried-and-tested power-sharing formula to maintain Malaysia's stability and economic growth even as MCA, the coalition's Chinese partner has been forced to "loan" to Umno its customary share of seats to be contested at both federal and state levels.

A total of 222 parliamentary and 505 state seats are up for grabs.

Malaysians will decide on May 5 whether to keep the BN that have governed for 56 years in power, or vote in a new coalition government comprising Anwar's PKR, the secular DAP and the Islamist PAS.

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