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## BN risks alienating electorate

By Ooi Kee Beng

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MALAYSIANS go to the polls on March 8. The billion-ringgit question is not what issues will be the rallying points, or which opposition party will win or lose this or that.

It will be how much less than the 91 per cent of parliamentary seats it now holds the ruling coalition will retain.

The Barisan Nasional (BN) cannot be threatened in any substantial manner. A worry that stems from this is how the enthusiasm of the politically engaged will suffer if the polling results do not mirror the discontent they recently expressed through large demonstrations and other means.

The ballot box is the ultimate measure of popularity in a democracy. Should the results of Malaysia's 12th general election fail to mirror the fall in popularity of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and his government, it will mean that the country's electoral process is flawed.

The electoral mechanism is widely suspected to be tilted in favour of the ruling coalition. It would be strange if this were not so, since the coalition has been in power for 50 years. The Malaysian tradition of gerrymandering and postal votes for the armed forces are additional factors.

The elections got off to a confusing start. Datuk Seri Abdullah announced on Feb 12 that he would not dissolve Parliament the next day as many had expected, given his apparent superstitious bias towards the number 13.

But the following day, he went back on his word and did exactly what he said he would not do. This flip-flop adds to the perception of Datuk Seri Abdullah as a leader without direction.

To add to the unreal atmosphere, two protests just after the elections were called were dispersed harshly by the police on the grounds that they were illegal. Both had been planned before Datuk Seri Abdullah's announcement.

One was organised by Bersih, an NGO that has been urging electoral reforms; and the other by the Hindu Rights Action Front (Hindraf). The latter protest ended with tear gas and water cannon being used against a small crowd of 300.

The fact that the administration used harsh methods to stop a rally by the openly disenchanted Indian community just three weeks before the general election shows either a lack of sensitivity or entrenched arrogance at the top.

Hindraf, in particular, has changed the political scene by highlighting the plight of marginalised Indians and by mobilising a large segment of the Indian population against the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), a BN component party

The immediate significance of this rise in Indian political consciousness is this: Should the MIC fare badly in the polls, the structure of the ruling BN itself may have to change. The ruling coalition's logic lies in it representing all ethnic communities. Should most Indians feel they are not being represented by BN, its legitimacy will suffer.

There are at least two reasons why a strong showing by the BN will not be taken as a correct reflection of voter sentiments, but rather as a reflection of the dice being loaded in the coalition's favour.

First, public unhappiness has been very pronounced recently. Rising inter-ethnic and inter-faith tensions have been matters of particular concern. Indians have dropped their traditional avoidance of public expressions of discontent, while the Chinese are worried by signs that the government does not consider secularism to be the cornerstone of Malaysian politics.

The economy, despite some rosy figures, is losing ground to competing countries, with the main cause said to be the affirmative action plan favouring Malays.

Second, constituencies vary greatly in size, with the pattern favouring Malay representation. For example, the Chinese-majority parliamentary constituency of Seputeh had 46,500 voters in 2004; the Malay-majority seat of Putrajaya boasted just 4,654. One Malay vote was thus worth about 10 Chinese ones.

Should the BN do well again, much of its success will be attributed to this structural partiality, and to postal votes from the military and police. Faith in the electoral infrastructure - weak at the best of times - will further erode.

The only way Datuk Seri Abdullah can diminish the expected wave of cynicism would be to reiterate - and actually fulfil - some of the promises he made four years ago. This time, it would be impossible for him to talk of reducing the budget deficit, given the large

number of development projects he has launched; nor can he promise to cut back on his predecessor's mega-projects.

Prime Minister Abdullah could repeat his vow to fight corruption within the police force and elsewhere, and even promise to do whatever he can to improve inter-racial and inter-religious relations. But given his track record over the past four years, few would believe him.

Should his style of governance and his strategy for nation-building remain the same - and should his dislike of public discussion continue - public cynicism will become endemic. That will not bode well for Malaysia.

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