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MALAYSIAN ELECTIONS

Winds of change blow, but softly

By Ooi Kee Beng

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THE Malaysian government proclaims that renewal is on the way, while the opposition calls for change. But there is much that will remain the same in Malaysia after Election Day on March 8 - and much that will not.

Among the things that will remain the same are these: The power of the 14-party ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), will stay unthreatened; the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) will continue to dominate the coalition; and old leaders - those who have not retired, at least - will remain at the top.

Among the things that will change are these: First, a younger breed of politicians will emerge, confident that they cannot be ignored. Within the ruling coalition, there are people like Mr Khairy Jamaluddin, the 32-year-old deputy head of Umno Youth and son-in-law of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi.

Other young leaders in BN include Mr Mukhriz Mahathir, son of former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad; Mr Lim Si Pin, son of retired Gerakan leader Lim Keng Yaik; and Mr Ling Hee Leong, son of retired MCA leader Ling Liong Sik. This list can be easily lengthened, and would include not just the scions of former leaders.

The opposition parties, too, have their share of 30-somethings - among them Ms Nurul Izah, daughter of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim; and Mr Jagdeep and Mr Gobind, sons of the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) Mr Karpal Singh.

This crop of young opposition leaders reflects the coming of age of those who were inspired by the Reformasi revolt of 1998-99, following Datuk Seri Anwar's sacking as deputy prime minister.

Young aspirants from both the ruling and opposition parties are merely the tip of the demographic iceberg that is the new and young Malaysia. The voters who can best relate to them are people of their age.

Second, the 2008 GE will come to be seen as the election when the Internet as a forum for political activism began to be realised. This is especially so since the mainstream mass media remains tightly controlled.

The establishment's intimidation of bloggers in the last two years has only served to galvanise the blogging community. In the process, blogging personalities such as Mr Tony Pua, Mr Jeff Ooi and Mr Badrul Hisham Shaharin have stepped forward to contest parliamentary seats. Interestingly, donations for some of these blogger-politicians are being collected through the Net.

Parallels are being drawn between the 2008 and 1999 general elections. In 1999, the ruling coalition, then led by Tun Dr Mahathir, was taught a lesson by unhappy voters. The wind this year is again blowing against the ruling coalition, some say, and Datuk Seri Abdullah will not win as handsomely this time round as he did in 2004.

The parallel is overplayed. For one thing, the winds of change are much weaker now and voters in general do not seem as passionate about upsetting the government as they were in 1999. Also, it is the non-Malays who wish to register their protest now, not Malays, as was the case in 1999. That makes all the difference. The BN cannot be threatened when Malay support for the coalition is not falling dramatically.

But the fact that more Chinese Malaysians appear willing to vote against the BN is noteworthy. The community seems to have a tendency to vote for the opposition every 20 years or so. It did so in 1969 and again in 1990. The indications are it will do so again this year, especially in Penang, Perak and Kuala Lumpur, areas with sizeable Chinese numbers.

In addition, what may make the most significant difference this year is the Indian vote. For the first time in living memory, Indian votes are no longer a given for the BN. With the Hindu Rights Action Front (Hindraf) as the catalyst, the community wants to punish the government for its long-term neglect.

Bearing the brunt of this displeasure will be the Malaysian Indian Congress, a component of the ruling coalition. Should it do badly, its leader S. Samy Vellu will be pressured to step down, and the BN will be forced to substantiate its claim to represent all ethnic groups.

With Indian disgruntlement merging with Chinese fear of Islamisation, the unique quality of the 2008 election may derive from the discontentment of the non-Malays. But the reality is that it is only when non-Malay discontentment coincides with Malay discontentment, and both are directed against the government, that we will finally be able to say: Yes, change has indeed come to Malaysia.

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