

(xii) Malaysian Solidarity Party (MSP)

All the political parties have their party symbols. The symbols used at the 1990 elections are reproduced as **Annex IX**.

The ruling coalition and the Opposition coalition comprising Semangat '46, DAP, PRM, MSP and AMIPF launched their manifestos on 12 and 13 October respectively. In very general terms the emphasis of the BN manifesto was on maintaining continuity and building upon its record in office while the Opposition emphasised the need for change of political leadership and national economic and social direction.

6. THE CAMPAIGN

The election campaign lasted just 10 days; it was described as the first since independence which presented the voters of Malaysia with an alternative alliance to the ruling coalition. This was an important election, with over 1,000 candidates and made for a short, intensive, and passionate campaign. The ghost of 1969 still hovers and many of the restrictions which circumscribed this election stem from that period.

In addition to the restrictions on the press which are dealt with in the following section, the restrictions on political campaigning are embodied in several laws including the Internal Security Act and the Police Act. These give the authorities powers to control political activities. The end result was an orderly, peaceful but controlled election campaign.

To many outsiders the many restrictions might seem surprising, but they were accepted by most Malaysians who assured us that they were necessary deterrents to any activities which might lead to communal violence. However it was put to us on several occasions that these restrictions have outlived their usefulness. Indeed, the Opposition alliance made this one of the planks of their manifesto.

The freedom of candidates to campaign without undue restriction is one of the principal attributes of a free and fair election and these campaign activities should enable a candidate to get his message across to the electorate through the media and advertising, through public and private meetings freely held and by house to house canvassing. We also considered that it was important for us to take into account such issues as whether all candidates had adequate freedom of movement and expression, had reasonable access to the media, and whether political meetings were prevented or even disrupted by the security forces or other bodies.

Only one type of political meeting is permitted. This is an indoor meeting called a *ceramah* and for which police permission is required. It must be held in an enclosed area such as a hall, hotel or private house. The police can intervene and stop the meeting if it attracts 20 or more people in the public area and if in the opinion of the police the meeting could be

detrimental to public order and security. However, we were assured on all sides that the police had been very liberal in enforcing the law.

We took the opportunity to attend some of these meetings in Kuala Lumpur and its environs as well as in the rural areas. These were very well attended, some with thousands of cheering well-behaved people and were in effect ordinary political meetings. Although political parties are not allowed to use either radio or television to advertise their meetings, and as far as we could make out, no notices about them were printed in the newspapers, the public clearly had ways of finding out where they were to be held and turned out in full strength to support their candidates. Surprisingly, one of the ceramahs we attended attracted over 3,000 people and was held in a large open field. The organisers told us that the police, of whom only 2 were present, had given them a licence for the evening, withdrawn it and then reinstated it. It had placed the organisers in a difficult situation but if the intention had been to prevent them from informing their supporters, this had clearly not been successful. But we also met Opposition members who alleged that it was almost impossible for them to get permits for meetings in certain constituencies.

As polling day drew nearer, we attended ceramahs all over the country. These ranged from quite small house meetings of about 20 people to very large ones attended by several thousands. On all occasions we were warmly welcomed by the political parties. In the rural areas, political activity was intense, and in one state at least, women's groups were active in house to house canvassing. Last minute voter education was organised with the importance of voting and voting correctly being emphasised.

An interesting feature of the campaign was the way the message was put across to the public. With such limited time devoted to the campaign on radio and television and no allowance for advertising on either, the main channels of communication therefore were newspaper coverage, house to house canvassing and ceramahs. The parties clearly had their own impressive network of planning and organisation to get their message across and maximise the votes.

The campaign was also strongly visual depending for its vitality not only on the excitement generated at meetings, but on images displayed on posters and miles and miles of bunting and posters. They criss-crossed cities and villages. Roads and highways gradually became festooned with buntings carrying small posters of party emblems and photographs of candidates. In some areas party emblems and bunting of opposing sides were hanging together as though they belonged to the same party. This presented an attractive image although as far as we could see no attempts were made to put forward the issues in the campaign by these methods.

This was an important election and as we expected the media's role was significant. Because of this we have devoted the following section to it.