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History an important guide in politics

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POLITICS, say its practitioners, is the art of the possible. As it is in business, there is no permanent enemy in politics but only permanent interests. Politics is, after all, just another business of life.

In the case of Malaysian politics, the last several years have seen the truth of these two statements being repeatedly proven with frightening accuracy - a point of history that is rich in lessons for present and future generations.

It is sweet to some, bitter to others. But it is a time-tested pointer that is unwise to ignore. Recent developments in Umno add relevance to this.

In 1987, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Tan Sri Musa Hitam showed it was possible for arch-rivals to forge a formidable partnership when the reason was strong enough. And what reason could be stronger than challenging the common enemy, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for the leadership of Umno.

They formed what later came to be known as "Team B" to challenge Dr Mahathir and his new Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba.

In the Umno elections of 1981 and 1984, Musa defeated Razaleigh for the post of deputy president. In the first instance, Musa's edge over Tengku Razaleigh was attributed to an indirect endorsement by the outgoing president, the late Tun Hussein Onn, when, in his presidential address, he made a reference to the importance of education. Musa was then Education Minister.

Musa won with a margin of 205 votes and in 1984, contesting as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Home Affairs, he widened the lead to 243 votes.

What was thought to be impossible became a reality, when, citing major differences with Dr Mahathir, Musa resigned as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Home Affairs on March 16, 1986 but remained as Umno deputy president.

His departure made it possible for Dr Mahathir to invite Ghafar to rejoin the Cabinet as Deputy Prime Minister.

Ghafar left the Cabinet on March 5, 1976 just weeks after Tun Hussein became Prime Minister following the death of Tun Abdul Razak.

In the 1987 party election, Tengku Razaleigh took on Dr Mahathir and Musa defended his position against Ghafar. It was the most divisive party election ever experienced by Umno.

"Team B" exploited the economic recession of 1985 and 1986 to weaken Dr Mahathir. Its battle cry was "remove Dr Mahathir and save the economy".

Dr Mahathir narrowly defended his post and Ghafar unseated Musa. Several members who refused to accept the outcome of the election took the party to court with the hope of having the poll declared null and void.

Another impossible thing happened. The plaintiffs got more than they bargained for. On April 4, 1988, the High Court declared Umno an unlawful organisation.

The fight to reinstate Umno followed. Dr Mahathir won and Tengku Razaleigh went on to form Parti Melayu Semangat 46. They bitterly fought for Malay votes in two general elections (1990 and 1995). Dr Mahathir and Umno prevailed.

It is no secret that the rivalry between Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh was deep-rooted and at times personal - a class struggle of sorts.

But once again the impossible happened.

On the eve of Umno's 50th anniversary last year, Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh shook hands and made up in the name of Malay unity. Semangat 46 was disbanded on Oct 3 and on Oct 9 its members were accepted into Umno.