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Political management is crucial in difficult times

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AS THE country endures the problems and difficulties brought about by speculative attacks on the ringgit and the stock exchange, effective political management becomes more critical and challenging.

It is in times like this that the people need their political leaders the most - from the local Yang Berhormat right up to the Prime Minister.

Already, enough complaints are being heard regarding missing Members of Parliament and State Assemblymen. They tend to appear regularly during election periods and less frequently or hardly at all thereafter.

While there are many extremely diligent YB, who either stay in their constituencies or make weekly trips back to be with the constituents, there are also those who spend more time away from their constituencies than in them.

In good economic times, many are so busy with their own businesses and professional practices that they depend entirely upon their "wakil peribadi" or personal representatives to carry out the Wakil Rakyat's duties.

In this context, the recent decision by the Johor Menteri Besar, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, to instruct all departmental heads to set aside Saturdays, beginning in the new year, to meet and resolve problems faced by the people, is most commendable. This move will further enhance their service to the rakyat.

This move however, should not diminish the role of the Wakil Rakyat. Instead, they should use this bureaucratic channel to improve communications with the people.

In challenging times like these, it is all too easy for political leaders to get bogged down by, and become preoccupied with, economic issues at the expense of political management.

This cannot be good for the leaders nor can it benefit the rakyat because, it is in times like this, that the people would like to be directly informed, by their leaders, of whatever is happening around them.

Several instances in the past, have shown that political stability will inevitably come under pressure in an economically difficult period. This was the case during the 1987 political challenge that culminated in the "Operasi Lalang" arrests under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

The challenge against political authority, which began as a campaign by the Democratic Action Party (DAP) to block the proposed development of Bukit Cina in Malacca, escalated into a full-blown political crisis.

The event coincided with a severe economic downturn two years earlier that saw the country's economy recording a negative growth of one per cent in 1985.

However, those who have witnessed the way in which the country solved its political and economic problems, starting with the May 13 1969 race riots, will acknowledge the importance of effective political management.

If the 1969 incident was precipitated, to a large degree, by political instability caused by the prolonged and racially-charged election campaign preceding the May 10 General Elections, the solution opted for by the National Operations Council (NOC) was definitely economic in nature.

The NOC was formed to administrate the country's affairs following the declaration of emergency and the suspension of democracy. Its first act was to restore law and order. This was followed by moves aimed at rebuilding public confidence in its authority.

It established the multi-racial and multi-sectoral National Consultative Council and formulated the New Economic Policy (1971-1990). Although the NEP did not find complete acceptance in all segments of the population, its programmes and approaches boosted economic growth, expanded the economic cake and brought about greater national pride and confidence.

The same could be achieved with an effectively-constituted National Economic Action Council (NEAC). Supported by a proper mechanism and by people of high credibility, the Council will be able to design and implement programmes that will extricate the country from the current problems.

This will free the political and administrative machinery, enabling it to continue serving the people, especially in rebuilding and reinforcing their confidence in the political leadership.

The duty of elected representatives is to ensure that any programme or project to be implemented by the Council will not be detrimental to the people. They must strive to ensure that current standards of living are not injudiciously eroded by unreasonable price increases and inflation.

In this context, the strong rebuke to profiteers by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday is timely and welcomed.

It is for this reason that the dichotomy between the Government and the Council is important and must be made visible and transparent. While giving the Council and its machinery a free hand, the Government must also stay above it.

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