

22/06/1998

Mahathir brings the real issue back into focus

Mustapha Kamil

CLEARLY, the severe economic pressure in the past 12 months poses a different kind of challenge to Umno although with the same kind of potential danger if not approached carefully - party and eventually nationwide disunity and collapse.

Starting with the presidential address by Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last Friday, the message got clearer as the party's General Assembly progressed.

Should Umno members be preoccupied with trying to project their individual beliefs as to how the economy and politics should be managed, they will only end up at odds with each other, thus making it even easier for outside forces to take advantage of the situation.

A day prior to Dr Mahathir's address, the somewhat fiery speech by Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi was seen by many as one that set a tone for a potentially explosive overall General Assembly.

Zahid's speech was preceded by months of various interpretations of two words which saw increasing usage in Malaysians' vocabulary since last July - nepotism and cronyism.

It came to a stage where some began to believe it was these two practices that caused the depression of the ringgit, the stock market and consequently the economy.

And on the day Zahid made his speech, when the General Assembly was adjourned, a rather tense atmosphere surrounded Umno as members awaited Dr Mahathir's presidential address.

An inescapable fact is that Dr Mahathir is a seasoned politician who has handled successfully many potentially crippling crises before, including the near collapse of the party itself in 1987.

More importantly, he is the architect responsible for taking Malaysia's economy to its heights and as such is expected to know best the rationale behind the Government's economic policy.

In his usual direct manner, Dr Mahathir posed a question to Umno members which roughly translated was: Would you rather be seen as vocal and heroic critics and hand over control of the economy to outsiders, or maintain the status-quo and work together to regain control of the country's now-threatened destiny?

Clearly, the question nipped in the bud a potentially explosive clash of views which could have split Umno and thrown its agenda into disarray.

Throughout the assembly it was clear that Umno members were still very much behind its president on ways to overcome the economic challenges and Zahid's message became increasingly faint.

By the time Dr Mahathir closed the assembly yesterday, the terms "cronyism" and "nepotism" were relegated to where they belong - the minds of destructive foreign parties and the uninformed and likely destructive critics.

Apparently there was a purpose why projects including privatization contracts tended to be directed to selected individuals - the simple commercial reason that they have greater potential to perform.

The party president provided the possible scenarios had this not been done: a higher risk of failures and consequently failures of the Malays and Bumiputeras in claiming their share of the economic pie.

The economic benefits to the Government through privatization projects were also elaborated on, including the higher likelihood of a steady

stream of tax revenue for the Government which in turn could be used to fund its various social responsibilities.

Of more significance was Dr Mahathir's repeated warning of the country being recolonised. Few at the assembly could match his experience on the subject.

Based on that experience, it was explained at length why Umno and Malaysians in general must at all costs preserve their unity to fend off the invisible outside attackers.

Dr Mahathir also questioned the validity of market forces as defined by the West and which in recent months quite a number of Malaysians have subscribed to.

The proponents of market forces had questioned the need for government intervention in assisting ailing large domestic corporations and also the Government's programmed wealth distribution.

The fact is quite a number of these corporations are owned by Bumiputeras and their collapse may well cause the failure of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Although not mentioned by the party president, collapse of the NEP may throw the wealth distribution among races off-balance once again. That could have disastrous consequences.

By providing assistance to these companies, the Government may seem going against market forces in the eyes of the West and those Malaysians who do not wish to be viewed as orthodox.

The truth is, by providing assistance to ailing companies in these trying times, the Government is doing what no other economy in the West has ever done successfully. It is protecting the distribution of wealth, essential in maintaining harmony in a multi-racial nation such as Malaysia which in turn is the platform for its success.

Thus, the Umno president showed his mettle by defusing yet again another potential crisis and this too by not meeting the Youth movement chief's fiery speech in a confrontational manner.

Dr Mahathir managed to bring back into focus the real issue at hand - nursing the economy back to health.

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