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Not seeing the forest for the trees

POLITICS and economics don't get any closer to a collision course than when a country is in a parlous state. The recent so-called political reforms in Indonesia provide a current example of this; world history is full of events detailing how economic fiascos lead to political upheaval and how political instability leads to economic or industrial revolutions. Since the Asian crisis broke out, everyone seems to have become political when making economic judgements and the economy has been used as an excuse for political change. It did not come as a surprise, therefore, that during the National Congress on Economic Recovery: The Way Forward in Kuala Lumpur last Wednesday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was asked whether he was considering early elections.

But is there actually a need for early elections? Does the Government that has won a mandate to rule for a full five-year term need to obtain a fresh mandate from the people every time the nation faces an economic crisis? If one component party of the ruling coalition faces internal problems, does the whole coalition need to go to the polls and insist that the people decide whether it is time for reform or change? It does seem that this is what some people want. It may just be a coincidence that such people are either in the Opposition and are harbouring hopes of being given a mandate to rule or foreign correspondents who think their job involves teaching people in developing countries how to think.

The principal issue facing Malaysia's 22 million people today is the economy, the prospect of losing jobs, the threat of lower salaries, a recession and a depression. Right now, Malaysians are striving to make capital controls work and to help revive the economy. There are problems related to politics and a component party in the ruling coalition, but those problems do not make this country politically unstable. The last time there were problems in Umno in 1987, party members organised their own elections and resolved the problem democratically. The rest of the country did not have to go to the polls. And for a decade after that Malaysia enjoyed its best economic spell since independence. So why are some parties implying that the people should be made to go to the polls this time around?

A general election is not the solution to the problems facing Malaysia. Soon after they were hit by the regional crisis, Indonesia and South Korea replaced their president, Thailand changed finance ministers and Russia sacked its entire Cabinet. Their economies have not fared any better for these political reforms. The riots in Indonesia have not stopped just because Suharto is no longer president and workers in Russia are still unpaid despite having picked a brand new Cabinet. The key to resolving the economic problems facing Malaysia is to draw the attention of the people to the economic issues. The people need to consolidate their efforts to tackle the economic threats. Any political problem must be addressed politically, democratically and quickly. The people must not be distracted from the real problems facing them, and that is the economy.

Such a distraction could have a devastating effect since in the country's present predicament, Malaysians do not have the luxury of time to entertain side-issues. They may engage in coffee shop talks about who they prefer to lead the country, debate on what they perceive as being wrongdoings by the Government and anything and everything political in nature. But the fact remains that they will be in trouble should they fail

to lend the Government a hand in the economic recovery efforts. The issue is how to raise the RM60 billion that might be needed for the economy to recover, build confidence in the local stock market, strengthen the financial system and bring back overall confidence in the Malaysian economy.

The country can tackle these economic problems only if the people remain united. Its leaders must also not lose sight of the issues at hand. They, more than anybody else, must be convinced that the question of political survival does not arise. For now, they ought to relegate politics to the backseat and be seen as leading the efforts that will haul the country out of the economic doldrums.

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