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Political developments highlight need for stability

Rashid Yusof

THIS has been a year of websites and political banners spewing vitriol, with the likes of Al Gore descending upon the local scene and Malaysian personalities being frequently featured on the covers of international magazines.

Future historians will undoubtedly make the connections between the personalities, issues and events that have taken place and tell us why they hold significance for Malaysians.

Most certainly, what has happened will have enormous bearing on how we will carry ourselves into the next millennium.

This has, after all, been a tough year for Malaysia and many found that events in the past 12 months had been unsettling. But the trying times have also awakened something in us.

For one, the silent majority - usually politically docile - stood up and told the world to leave Malaysia alone, the tumultuous events having helped to heighten their political awareness and maturity.

Also late this year, political succession - for the most part smoothly executed since Independence - was thrown into disarray with the Sept 2 sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the Cabinet.

And, in connection with his removal from office, 1998 will be remembered for a short but tense spate of street demonstrations. A political conspiracy, claimed Anwar as he whipped up a frenzy of emotions nationwide and pushed for the resignation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Anwar's arrest under the Internal Security Act hours after a rally at the National Mosque on Sept 20 was a world media event. When street demonstrations took place after the arrest, some of our movements were curtailed, businesses were disrupted, tourists cancelled their trips and a pall of gloom descended upon us.

In the meantime, new bodies like Gerak (comprising PAS, DAP, Parti Rakyat Malaysia and NGOs) and Gagasan or Coalition for People's Democracy were formed, adding yet more colour to our political landscape.

Existing bodies such as Suaram, Hakam and other interest groups have also made their contributions to the political arena. More recently, we saw the formation of Adil, a reform movement led by Anwar's wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

Claiming to be non-partisan and above politics, its formation met with varied responses, top of which was - why not participate fully in the political process and try to make something out of it? Only time (and resources) will tell whether it will move in that direction.

The movement appears to be closely linked to the crowds who have gathered in certain areas of Kuala Lumpur, chanting reformasi week after week following Anwar's arrest.

These demonstrators - who turned violent on a couple of weekends - have insisted on Dr Mahathir's resignation, the dismantling of the ISA as well as the reinstatement of Anwar.

Quite naturally, such defiance drew the attention of the world media which has been following events in Malaysia ever since. Of course, the portrayal of these events have not always been done with accuracy or balance - until recently a hallmark of established media establishments.

From New York to Sydney, there were newspaper reports and television coverage of "escalating political turmoil" in Malaysia.

Few dared to come because the reports indicated that there were "street protests everywhere", that "rioting and looting" were taking place in the capital.

When there were no demonstrations to report, there was news of an "uneasy calm". Incidentally, it was amidst such "uneasy calm" and "mounting upheaval" that the country played host to the annual summit of Apec leaders.

In some instances, images of rioting in Indonesia would be melded with events taking place in Malaysia, painting a picture of political havoc in this country.

To be sure, the biased and inaccurate reporting of events by some foreign reporters have done considerable damage to business and tourism.

At home, political commentary was given a new lease of life with pundits trying to neutralise each other's arguments. Much of this was waged over programmes like ntv7's Dateline Malaysia.

At the warungs, conversations would become volatile with the mention of certain names or questions like "who do you support?"

Perhaps, the most unfortunate consequence of recent political events has been the insistence on the part of many that if you speak against Anwar, you had to be pro-Government. But if you criticised the Government, you automatically became an Anwar supporter.

At this point, American Vice-President Al Gore, deputising for his boss Bill Clinton (who himself has a political battle on his hands over the Monica Lewinsky affair which could lead to his removal from office) came to an Apec dinner and declared his support for the so-called "brave people" within the reformasi movement.

Malaysians reacted with anger. As if awakened from a long period of slumber, these people suddenly felt emboldened to speak out, to chastise the American government for the hypocrisy and double standards it practises in its dealings with other nations.

Unwittingly, Gore brought Malaysians together. And lent credence to a growing belief that "outsiders" have their own damaging agenda for the country.

Still, as we leave the old year and move into the next, we carry with us a long list of difficult questions.

Will the recent political problems unravel all that we have painstakingly built for this country?

Who will be the next Deputy Prime Minister and will the new year see drastic policy changes which will affect us?

Must personalities always take precedence over issues in politics? Will we enjoy more latitude to express our thoughts and grievances? Have we learnt from the economic and political crisis?

By year-end, with the display of political fireworks seemingly doused in the spirit of Ramadan, events nonetheless continue to unfold in the Anwar Ibrahim trial and elsewhere.

The last 12 months have certainly been tough.

But having come thus far, we can only move on.

There will be no turning back.

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