

07/06/1999

Keadilan lacks a convincing platform

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AT any time within the next ten months, Parliament will be dissolved, and the general election will be called.

As in any democratic country, millions of Malaysian voters will elect a government of their choice, and determine the political and economic direction of the country.

For at least two reasons, the next election could be the most important event in recent memory. First, the turmoil caused by currency speculators has adversely affected our currency, the share market and the economy. Second, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's case has generated controversy among some Malays.

There is nothing wrong with political debate or controversy. Indeed, they are an acceptable part of the democratic process.

However, they should always be conducted in a civil and legal manner, based on fact and reason. They should never incite and produce violence, hurl personal abuse, call of assassinations, or endanger the harmony of our multicultural society.

It is, therefore, important that we address the two issues (economic and political) that confront the nation calmly and rationally, well ahead of the election. We should evaluate the accomplishments and plans of the competing parties and the capability of their leaders, with a pragmatic eye.

Let us look at the facts.

Our economy, including several other Asian economies, had been badly hit, since July 1997, by the twin forces of currency and share market declines.

The "international community" (meaning a few developed countries) had prescribed the International Monetary Fund "medicine" as a cure for this "Asian contagion". This would have allowed the "market forces" (meaning foreign entities with much capital and greed to match) to buy up Malaysian companies very cheaply (because of the fall in the value of the ringgit).

A few neighbouring countries accepted the IMF medicine. We now know the side effects of that line of treatment. It did not do Indonesia much good, and many former Thai bank analysts still drive taxis and sell fried noodles.

What did the Malaysian Government do? It rejected the IMF's conventional wisdom. Instead, it did its own diagnosis, and wrote its own prescription. This took courage and original thinking.

The Malaysian answer includes a restructuring and consolidation of our weakened financial system, and an improvement in its procedures and transparency, as well as:

- \* Assisting companies affected by the currency turmoil;
- \* Improving liquidity in the economy; and
- \* Insulating the ringgit and denying foreign speculators access to it, thus stabilising the currency at a "pegged" rate against the US dollar, and thereby increasing confidence in its (ringgit's) stability.

The measures worked. International currency predators and the foreign media were not overjoyed. But they had to contend with the fact that the Malaysian formula worked. Even mainstream economists in foreign universities now acknowledge this.

Key indicators such as gross national product, the balance of trade, foreign exchange reserves, the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange composite

index, etc. all show that the economy is well-managed and is on the road to recovery.

It will take time. But it is proceeding in the right direction. The recent successful launch of the Malaysian bond worth US\$1 billion (RM3.8 billion) in New York is proof of this.

The credit for this successful policy goes to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin.

The Government's management of the economy is clearly defined and easily understood. However, the current political situation, clouded by emotion, requires a slightly more refined appreciation.

Political debates anywhere generate more emotion than reason, more heat than light. They are no different here.

The core of the current debate is the issue surrounding Anwar, which has been fully exploited by the agenda-driven foreign media. It was open season for "Malaysia bashing".

On the other hand, no mention is made of the enormous moral courage it took for Dr Mahathir to remove his deputy and save the country from a person he believes is unsuitable to lead it.

Foreigners have their agenda. They state quite categorically that Anwar did not receive "due process of law" and created an impression overseas that Malaysia was on the brink of chaos. After all, some sections of the media thrive on sensationalism.

But Malaysians have to evaluate the situation realistically, because we have to live with the consequences of our views and actions.

We must recognise viscerally that Malaysia is multiracial yet democratic. Hence, the law and social sensitivity are critical for us to survive as a nation. After witnessing the carnage, rapes and gore in other countries, it is clear that ours is a uniquely successful system.

We have managed to survive since independence in 1957, and have prospered greatly during the last two decades. All this did not happen naturally or by accident. It happened because:

- \* There is ethnic stability and harmony;
- \* We have formulated a winning political formula where there is mainstream multiracial participation in politics and the economy;
- \* The economy is systematically planned, based on the Industrial Master Plan; and
- \* Foreign investors, especially those in direct investment, are secure in the knowledge that the Government is stable, and its economic policies are not likely to suffer from political vicissitudes.

Politically, the turn of events have not been helpful. The Anwar affair has affected us adversely in two ways.

\* Short term - image: Malaysia had always enjoyed an image of political stability. The recent street violence has done the nation some disservice, giving it a "Jakarta-like" image, as if Malaysians are starved of food and democratic representation, and are repressed by the military.

\* Long term - unity of the nation: The nation's peace, stability and economic progress are based primarily on Malay unity and a strong Umno. A united Umno means a strong Barisan Nasional and a stable and united government.

All this is self-evident. But how deeply and viscerally is this fact acknowledged among certain sections of the Malays?

Support for Parti Keadilan Nasional, albeit small, demonstrates a puzzling lack of logic and appreciation of the long-term national interest.

Have Keadilan supporters ever wondered how the party can ever put together a credible platform comprising its Malay members' demand for recognition of Malay rights, the DAP's Chinese demands, and Pas' call for

an Islamic state?

Any support for Keadilan, however small, will end up as "wasted voting strength". Let us face it. Keadilan can never form an alternative government. Its components are too incompatible to work together.

How this political trend can help the nation's stability, its role in an increasingly competitive market-driven world, and the future of the next generation of Malaysians, only Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, the head of Keadilan, can explain.

Dr Wan Azizah has enjoyed much exposure in the foreign and local media. Pertinent questions have been put to her, such as the incompatible positions of Keadilan's component parties. She has evaded the questions either with vague remarks about "human rights" and "justice for all", or with promises to "consult her advisers" and to re-examine the issues "more deeply". This is hardly reassuring.

So far, Keadilan has failed to offer a cogent, comprehensive and convincingly argued programme - one that is for a politically stable and united country, and a highly developed and competitive economy that can survive in a market-driven global economy.

In short, a platform that can attract a responsible voter's attention.