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Pas is riding the anti-government wave

Askiah Adam

UMNO has some five years to redeem itself. Is this time enough? The answer must surely lie in how it perceives its recent electoral losses.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says it is ingratitude, fired with a liberal dose of lies, that turned the so-called "Anwar factor" into a potent rallying cry for the Malay opposition.

How else can one explain Pas' largest ever electoral victory given the government's undisputed success at staving off the worst excesses of the current economic slowdown?

The irony is not lost on the Prime Minister. Umno is the victim of its own successful social engineering policies.

Nationalism is no longer enough for the Malay spirit. Rather, their comparatively large, newly emerging middle classes, having been catapulted out of the peasant economy in less than a generation, are clearly exhibiting the specifically nouveau riche infantile affliction of "rebels-without-a-cause". Or, is there cause?

Whether Umno has lost a sizeable swathe of its influence, temporarily or otherwise, will depend on how it reorders its own house. But before that can happen it must understand the true nature of the grouses that fed the voters' rebellion, ingratitude notwithstanding.

Although the protest revolved around the "Anwar factor", the main beneficiary was Pas and not Keadilan, the single issue party of "Anwar for PM".

How this came about is irrelevant. The fact remains that Pas is still Umno's only rival for Malay hearts and minds.

Therefore, how will Umno seek to regain the confidence of the misled ingrates?

All that is needed is a restoration of the principle of separation of powers to ensure accountability and a strict adherence of the rule of law.

Unfortunately, it is no longer as simple now that Malaysia's richest Malay State, Terengganu, has fallen to Pas.

Like it or not, Pas is riding the anti-government wave on the Islam ticket.

The Terengganu State Government's debut budget is couched in Islamic terms and carries a loud welfare banner. In the short term, all things remaining equal, the absence of a productive economy outside of oil and gas production will be inconsequential.

Terengganu will be not unlike Brunei. A small, oil rich State: rich enough to keep all its people in relative prosperity. But, unlike Brunei, it has a democratically elected government.

And, if the Pas leadership retains its espoused course and sticks with it, the public welfare oriented policies of this first budget will see an increasingly more equitable distribution of wealth.

Against this possible scenario, Umno will have to make manifest its Islamic credentials. What then will be the Islamic face that it will take?

There have been suggestions that they will not go the "Islamic way". It has, after all, a much broader appeal and to maintain that appeal it cannot afford to assume the conservatism of Pas.

Is this a sustainable argument? Not really.

What other Islam is there in Malaysia. All the country's ulama, no matter where they stand along the political divide, appear not to subscribe to something more accommodative of modern universal values.

Hence, the paralysis of Umno's own religious officials to counter the Pas position. This is why, despite its failure in Kelantan, to the voter Pas is an alternative. The election results demonstrate this.

And against Pas' almost inevitable success in Terengganu as the economic and spiritual saviour of the Muslims (inadvertently Malays), short of sabotage, Umno has no choice but to don the hijab and sport the jubah, if not literally then metaphorically.

Only then can transparency and accountability work in helping to regain Umno's unquestionable ascendancy.

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