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Backstabbing: Et tu San Choon?

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DON'T draw conclusions prematurely based on a single alleged fact. As Charles Dickens said: "One foul wind no more makes a winter, than one swallow makes a summer." Just as proclaimed equality does not mean true equality.

Politicians, like devils, will do what it takes, even quote scripture, for their own ends. I will be fair to politicians and devils. It does not mean that when they quote scripture they really want to deceive, they merely want to support their position. Shakespeare himself wrote in the Merchant of Venice, "the devil can cite scripture for his own purpose".

Malaysian politics is still and shall be, for a long time to come, dominated by racial and religious considerations. The ethnic and religious make-up of the nation dictates the direction of politics and government policies.

Ten days ago, the former Minister of Transport and president of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Tan Sri Lee San Choon, who quit both posts in 1983, alleged that he was "stabbed in the back" by Umno leaders in the 1982 general election when he contested and won against the then DAP chairman, Dr Chen Man Hin. He had fought Dr Chen to prove that MCA had the support of the Chinese community.

Lee made his allegation in the Chinese edition of Asiaweek which carried an interview with him in its Sept 4 issue. This is the first time that he has come out to talk openly about his sudden retirement from politics, when he was at the height of his career.

It was all the more puzzling as it came so soon after having beaten Dr Chen in Seremban, traditionally a DAP stronghold, and which MCA subsequently "gave away" to Dr Chen during a by-election following Lee's resignation.

Lee said: "We wanted to prove that the MCA did not need to rely on the support of the Malay leaders (Umno) to win so that the Government will take us seriously. Although I managed to defeat Dr Chen, winning was not easy. Umno leaders stabbed me in the back. There were not many Malay voters who supported me as they did not like the way I did things".

Whatever, Lee's claim will never set the Gombak river on fire. It won't amount to much.

Asked to comment on Lee's statement, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, "I would not want to comment. But I know that I campaigned for Lee in the election to defeat the opposition candidate. I still remember the speech I made. I said Lee San Choon does not have to shout to tell me anything as he is seated next to me; he whispers it and I will hear."

Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, who was then Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar, had this to say: "Let's give him the benefit of the doubt and let him come up with his own version of the story. But as far as I know and remember, San Choon and I worked very well to forge ahead for victory at that time and he did win".

Dr Rais also said that he was not disputing Lee's version of the events in 1982 but noted that it was Lee's personal appraisal and not MCA's. Tun Daim Zainuddin, however, stated that Lee San Choon would have found it difficult to win had it not been due to the Malay contribution.

Lee said that the present MCA is directionless because it just deals with day-to-day tasks, but that notwithstanding, Umno should not

underestimate MCA. He is not worried about Pas and is confident that the Barisan Nasional will continue to govern the nation for a long time to come.

On the future of the Chinese, Lee is very optimistic and believes that they will do well economically whatever the circumstances, being a practical and resilient people.

Despite what he implied in the interview, Lee gives Dr Mahathir a good report card: "When Dr Mahathir was appointed Deputy PM in 1976, MCA did not express its stand as we have our own opinion. Maybe Dr Mahathir kept this at heart. Dr Mahathir has brought great changes. We must give him credit as other PMs (after him) might not be able to do as well as him. Dr Mahathir has grown with the job".

It was no secret that MCA and Lee personally had preferred Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah as deputy Prime Minister in March 1976. But Datuk Hussein Onn, in his wisdom, chose Dr Mahathir.

Hussein's first choice was Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, then the Minister of Home Affairs. However, all senior Umno leaders in the Supreme Council, in particular the three vice-presidents - Ghafar Baba, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Dr Mahathir - categorically told Hussein that they would not accept any Cabinet posts if he made the extremely unpopular Ghazali his deputy. I was a member of the council.

It was not only this stand by the vice-presidents that deterred Hussein.

Openly and secretly, people in and outside Umno spoke to Hussein against choosing Ghazali. Alas for Ghazali, most of his friends were mainly foreigners who had been beguiled by him. Hussein, to his great credit, discounted them. Indeed, Hussein was quite furious with a particular envoy for having the audacity to try and pressure him into making Ghazali his deputy.

Those who did not know Umno's latent palace politics were not aware that Tun Abdul Razak was grooming Dr Mahathir as his eventual successor, along with three alternates.

So, for those who thought Dr Mahathir's arrival at Jalan Dato' Onn in March 1976 was a fluke were actually untutored in Umno's inner politics. Barely a year after taking over as Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir's personality, in a sense, became government and party policy and it has been so ever since.

The challenges facing Malaysia's longest serving Prime Minister are many. Even though many are eager to be done with divisive politics in the bumiputera community, Dr Mahathir's departure at this juncture, as wished by his enemies, will not be enough to heal the rift.

The politics of hate has spread like cancer. The only good thing is that the mood amongst the bumiputeras now is neither pessimism nor optimism.

For all the setbacks, and errors in judgement that led to electoral disaster in the last general election, Umno and Dr Mahathir are far from finished. Umno will recover to regain the support that it once had and enjoyed, though this will not be the case in Kelantan and Terengganu.

In my 38 years in Umno (minus five years in Ghulam's prison) neither Umno, as an organisation, nor any of its major leaders, to my knowledge, has stabbed MCA or any of its senior leaders in the back.

Instead, Tun Razak, though viewed by some in MCA as anti-Chinese, went out of his way to help MCA recover from its depression following its "near total rejection" by the Chinese electorate in the most fractious and violent general election campaign in 1969, when he appointed a young Chinese doctor from Perak, Lim Keng Yaik, as a Cabinet Minister to mobilise Chinese grassroots support for MCA.

I personally know Lee San Choon has always been close to Tengku Razaleigh and his sudden decision to leave government and active politics

for business, I believe, was due to his wish not to continue serving Dr Mahathir.

Lee and Dr Mahathir, many people - including many Umno insiders - did not know were members of a very small crypto-special informal group set up jointly by Tun Razak and Tun Tan Siew Sin after the traumatic May 13, 1969 race riots to find ways not only to hasten Malay-Chinese reconciliation but also to enhance co-operation at all levels.

I should know because I was a member of that select group. Lee was the leader of the MCA "Young Turks" while Dr Mahathir was the spokesman of the Umno radical faction. It was propitious because each became leader of his party (Lee in 1974 and Dr Mahathir in 1981). It says much for Tun Razak's and Tun Tan Siew Sin's shrewd judgments.

The Umno-MCA partnership is 48 years old and I know, for some, if Malaysia is to survive and prosper, the coalition parties must remain united and further strengthened. Otherwise what Pas desires, the establishment of an oppressive Islamic theocratic nation, will become a fact sooner than you may realise.

Notwithstanding what he said, Lee San Choon has always been a decent man, as good as any politician can possibly be. His is a voice from the past. His statement is not meant, I suppose, to be provocative. Perhaps Lee has reached a stage where he has become conscious of his place in MCA history.

He has every right to recall what he thought happened 17 years ago, just as others should look back and state their versions of what occurred or did not take place then. Lee will be the first person to agree that "terminal boredom" has not set in in the Umno-MCA alliance.

For all the setbacks, disappointments and even disillusionment, the new millennium has hitherto been less dangerous for coalition politics than it was at its most dangerous level in 1959 and 1969.

Umno will endure as it has endured, will grow stronger and will prosper. But first of all, it must assert its firm belief that the only thing the leadership has to fear is fear itself as Franklin Roosevelt said in 1933.

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