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Facing up to the Pas challenge

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ALL must accept the fact that the majority race is disunited as it has never been before.

I do not want to argue about theories or the causes (there are many); I just want to stress it is a fact, not fiction.

The erosion of popular support for ruling parties, Umno in particular, during the last general election was not unexpected. But eight months have lapsed and after two by-elections, both of which the Barisan Nasional won, the Malay divide and indeed racial polarisation are seemingly spreading and widening.

The disgraceful heists at two Askar Wataniah camps in Grik, the torture and murder of two non-Muslim security forces personnel in Sauk and the spate of robberies and other crimes, power failure whenever there is a thunderstorm and the occasional breakdown of water supply and other services, which the public pays for, I must say, are not at all helping the Government and Umno's confidence building efforts.

What happens on the ground, I'm afraid, is not like what some leaders say and some even boast. We must not use Indonesia, the sub-continent and the Philippines as our benchmark.

Of course, even simpletons know we are better, but the question is how do we rate when we compare ourselves with Singapore and Japan?

The supersensitivity and an unbearable and unbelievable complacency of one or two ruling politicians and that of their "superwives" and "advisers" is not good for the party they represent, themselves or the nation.

Can't a writer pen the truth without being charged with having a design? What if I say someone is destined to be destroyed by his own doing or that of his wife?

My schoolmate at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), Umno secretary-general and Minister of Information Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob told me about how the people are "cemoh or have reached the end of their tether with a particular politician".

The Pas challenge is very real; never before has it become a significant player. Its influence is growing because many Malays, as Khalil has sincerely stated, were and are fed up with the obvious culprits who remain protected and unpunished.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad always says - what is the use of winning posts in Umno if the party loses in the next general election.

And I am stating this, not that I approve of Pas, but people are veering towards it because they have become so disenchanting and disillusioned with several Umno leaders, especially in the north-eastern states and even in several states on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

The verdict of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's long sodomy trial on Friday - whichever way the judge decides - can spark trouble. It is assuring to know that the police have said it will be able to maintain peace and security.

An excessive reaction to either: conviction or acquittal can spark trouble. The supporters of the Opposition and Anwar's sympathisers have been systematically and cleverly manipulated and conditioned to respond to either situation.

They have also been subverted to challenge the authority of Dr Mahathir

- they are angry with the Government for seemingly, following the general election, placating the Chinese at the expense of the Bumiputeras.

Their latent leaders are tempting their fanatical followers to even threaten the delicately balanced racial interests, which have been deftly maintained since 1955 through bargaining and compromise among the leaders, first of the Alliance and now the Barisan Nasional.

While Umno, the lead party in the ruling BN, appears to be on the defensive, Pas, the major constituent in the Opposition Front, seems possessed by a gung-ho attitude towards Umno, hitherto the main stumbling block between the party and the moderate Bumiputera electorate.

Islam commands great respect of the Malays and Muslim Bumiputeras. Umno puts greater emphasis on "fardhu kifayah", or services to the community, besides faith and routine rituals whereas Pas preaches with considerable success and appeal by harping on enhancing punishment for khalwat (close proximity between sexes), drinking, adultery, gambling, eating in non-halal restaurants, dancing and not wearing scarves.

Pas wants to turn multi-religious Malaysia into a puritanical theocratic Islamic nation.

Umno is for multi-racial politics and progress. Pas has shifted from being a rural Malay-centric party to militant Islamic politics following other militant Muslim nations.

This is what Malay politics is all about today. Pas now has 27 MPs and it controls the Kelantan and Terengganu State Governments. Their Menteri Besar are both conservative theologians and preachers.

The stiff competition to win the Bumiputera electorate is in earnest even though the 11th general election is 52 months away.

Pas is in a state of euphoria, displaying great confidence in the future. Be that as it may, I maintain Pas remains and will always remain as an extremist Malay-centric party which cleverly exploits Islam to win power.

The Islamists' worst enemies are (fortunately) themselves. They insist and will fight to retain the word "Islam" in the party's name. The Government has been thinking for a long time about disallowing the word "Islam" to be used by a political party because it has caused the present serious Malay divide.

The Government should have acted firmly years ago, but it did not because it was, as always, overconfident and conscious of what other people would say if the word "Islam" was banned.

There is no doubt now and in future that Pas is the greatest challenge Umno must confront. If Pas is clever enough, it must focus less on Islam and instead venture into fighting issues that go beyond the Islamic confine.

In October 1990, 20 Islamic fanatics, dressed in white robes and branding swords, attacked the Batu Pahat police station. Like in Memali and the Al Maunah fanatics, they also had believed they were "kebal" or invulnerable.

All did what they did in the name of political Islam, anticipating that their action would precipitate an Islamic fundamentalist revolution and after the victory a puritanical Islamic government would rule.

Malaysians of all races are lucky thus far because Pas has not learnt to speak in a different political language. It is still using the same political idiom - declaiming puritanical Islamic politics, jargons and slogans in a melting pot.

Pas will soon enough learn to speak softly, even persuasively, but be forewarned that it will be all about winning votes, nothing else. The ultimate objective - the establishment of a puritanical Islamic theocratic state - remains.

The challenge confronting Pas then and now is simple: Pas has to show its relevance to a modern melting pot, not only in Terengganu and Kelantan where the population is almost homogeneous like Japan.

As Pas faces the challenge of the blistering realities of Malaysian politics, Umno must relaunch a bold plan to win back the hearts and minds of those who have become disillusioned and disenchanting and to capture the imagination and expectations of the youth.

All the fanatics have achieved, so many people say, is to put Islam to ridicule and contempt. Non-Muslims mocked the fanatics as "characters living in fantasy" even though we are seven months into the new millennium.

I wonder how long this potentially explosive mix of religion and politics articulated by Pas will be tolerated by the Government and the silent majority.

Must we wait until the politics of hate consumes us all?

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