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Learning from past political experiences

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PARTI Keadilan Nasional is celebrating its first anniversary - a year full of drama supported by hatred, anger, uncertainties and, of course, frustration.

The party, in a month-long celebration, plans to reflect on what has happened in the past year and chart its direction to remain relevant in the nation's political scene.

Umno will be celebrating its 54th anniversary on May 11. At the same time, it will be holding its general assembly which, this time around, will settle the leadership succession issue for the party as well as for the country.

Pas will hold in June its muktamar, an Arabic term which in effect means the same as a general assembly. Apart from reaffirming its need for Ketuanan Islam (Islamic dominance), the Pas assembly is expected to also figure out how to get support from the non-Malays.

Looking at the present enmity and the way these political parties are going at each other, it is difficult to imagine that all three were "once one".

Today, Pas has shed almost all semblance or similarities it may have had of Umno, its original entity, given the fact that the split happened in 1951.

In the case of Keadilan, some of its members, who were mainly from Umno, still carry the style and approach of their former alma mater.

On that score, whichever path these political parties choose to tread, the package reflects how much politics has actually divided the Malays.

In the beginning, when Malay nationalism came to roost, Umno became the unifying factor of the numerous different Malay-based organisations, which found a common cause in fighting British colonialism.

By the time independence was no longer a mere dream, Pas, or the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) as it was then known, was formed.

Like an estranged cousin, PMIP started opposing Umno in almost everything it did, from the fight for independence to the way it should be pursued.

Within the Umno household, factions formed when its founder Datuk Onn Jaafar proposed that the party be opened to all races which later on led to him leaving Umno to form the Independence for Malaya Party (IMP).

Tunku Abdul Rahman took over Umno's helm and the struggle between him and Onn in pursuing political supremacy was deemed as a battle of "abang-adik" (between brothers).

After IMP's multi-racial concept failed to make much of an impact in the political arena, Onn decided to revert back to the original concept of a racial-based party and formed the Parti Negara.

This, too, failed to make any headway and both, the party and Onn, went into the political wilderness.

Since then, disunity among the Malays has prevailed but somehow or other, Umno has remained the leading party for the community.

But against this scenario of disunity and factionalism, Malay politics has also had its share of reconciliations.

Pas, for example, had in 1974 agreed to join Barisan Nasional to work together with Umno in the coalition.

Some of its leaders, who are still active in Pas, even served under the then Razak Cabinet.

But, alas, the marriage did not last. Pas was asked to leave the coalition after a few years and since then, it has remained a bitter enemy of Umno.

And in so far as the present leaders of Pas are concerned, there are no sweet memories from their temporary marriage to BN.

Then, in 1987, when Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah decided to take on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for the Umno presidency, a new addition to the existing split between the Malays, started brewing.

Semangat 46 was formed and the former Umno "brothers in arms" decided to move on to work with Pas.

This alliance was powerful in that it managed to wrest Kelantan from Umno's control in the 1990 general elections.

But the Semangat/Pas cooperation was not fated to last, either. In fact, from the beginning, they were strange bedfellows given their stark ideological polarity.

By 1996, Semangat returned to Umno's fold in the name of Malay unity.

Some two years later, another problem occurred within Umno following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

It was indeed shocking, especially when the Dr Mahathir-Anwar team had been seen as an ideal bapak-anak (father and son) combination.

The anak, in this case Anwar, decided to mount a fight against the father and so bitter was the battle that many political lives have been sacrificed.

The seething hostility is being justified by the son that it was a battle against a cruel father.

Before long, Keadilan was formed and almost like a predictable plot, it decided to team up with Pas, Umno's cousin from the past.

And a sense of deja vu prevailed in the 1999 general elections which saw Terengganu being wrested from Umno by Pas.

Are the Malays to expect a similar script from Keadilan, say 10 years from now, as what they saw happen with Semangat, in which the former ends up abandoning Pas and rejoining Umno?

Of course, such thoughts would be dismissed as being mischievous by Keadilan leaders and supporters.

That was how Semangat leaders used to feel when such thoughts were spelled out to them in the open.

The party supporters then used to go into a near frenzy whenever reports pointed out that Semangat was not making much headway in trying to replace Umno.

Keadilan supporters, too, have been showing similar tendencies when it is pointed out that their struggle did not bear the fruit they had hoped to reap in the last general elections.

What is important here is that such past experiences should remind the Malays not to be overly emotional in their political participation.

Time and again, political leaders have been known to kiss and make up when the need arose but whenever they did that, the supporters were usually left in the lurch.

Now that talk of Malay unity is emerging again, surely it should not be that difficult for political leaders from the different parties to consider the possibilities of finding a common ground to work for the community.

After all, they were originally from the same political family.

If they can't, then it is obvious that the Malays need not be wary of the enemies around them.

The enemy, if any, is from within.

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