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Malays need to scale new frontiers

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WHEN I was appointed as political secretary to Tun Razak Hussein in October 1963, I did not have a clear idea about its functions. I had no staff. I was the first political secretary to be appointed followed by another two days later, attached to Encik Mohamed Khir Johari, the Minister of Commerce and Industry.

The political and government functions soon became mixed up and I spoke to Tun Razak about the absurdity of competition for influence. To avoid further complications, he told me my main job would be to whisper, inform, advise him and to implement his decisions and those of Umno and the Government.

I did it for 13 years and the ruling party won three general elections. The 1964 general election, in spite of the Indonesian confrontation, was relatively easy.

The 1969 general election was the most divisive and violent which led to the traumatic May 13, 1969 race riots. The Alliance Party was replaced by the Barisan Nasional (BN) on June 1, 1974 and I stood for Parliament in Machang, Kelantan, in the general election in August and won the seat with ease, as with all other BN candidates. I was made a Deputy Minister answerable only to Tun Razak. He also appointed me to the Umno supreme council.

I have studied, covered and followed Pas politics since 1957, first as a reporter of this newspaper, then as an Umno politician and now I'm back where I started.

A lot of polluted water has flowed under the bridge since the last general election. We've travelled a long distance since then; I have, you have, the country has, but the question is, have the Malays?

No, they haven't done as well as expected economically, educationally and technologically. Even in politics, their position is less secure than it was three decades ago. The intense political competition among the Malays is partly responsible for their reduced political clout.

If in the 44th year of independence, the alleged dominant race talks of the need for a Majlis Melayu (Malay Council) to act as the guardian of Malay elan, progress and rights, then they can't possibly have attained much collective verve nor have they left their orchards for plantations. They must scale new frontiers.

The 60 people I spoke to in Kuala Terengganu last week, all graduates, from diverse political backgrounds, responded in a typically relaxed grown-up Malay style: this is the iconoclastic 2000. It is an idealistic period, for wishing and dreaming about the impossible or what you fancy, no matter how unrealistic.

Perhaps, the Malay electorate did the ruling Umno a favour even if it didn't feel like that when the devastating results hit it.

Kelantan Umno holds conventions periodically. Last Saturday's was the latest, and many Kelantanese pondered over what benefits the feel-good convention had brought. Has Kelantan Umno attained a new maturity to meet the challenge of the harsh realities of Kelantan politics and Tok Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who whether one likes it or not is viewed by a majority of the Kelantanese within and without Kelantan as an Islamic icon.

A top Kelantanese civil servant, a crypto Umno supporter, told me: "Kelantan Umno has become unelectable because its leadership is full of discredited old faces..."

According to a friend who attended the convention, he found no fresh faces in the convention hall.

Another participant told me: "Even Datuk Mustapa Mohamad, about the most decent man ever to lead Kelantan Umno, sounded contrived; he did not ring true when he stated 'Umno wants to produce a model Islamic nation which gives priority to fulfilling its fardhu ain (compulsory duties for Muslim individuals) and fardhu kifayah (compulsory service or contributions to society)... a state which strives equally for worldly progress and grace in the hereafter'."

I know Mustapa well. He means what he says.

It is one of the absurdities of Malay politics that a growing number of Malays, whether educated or semi-educated, has seemingly cast Umno as not doing enough for Islam and the Malays simply because Pas states so.

Pas, and even Umno surely, must draw a line. Malaysia is a land of religious and racial diversity.

There is nothing new about the Malay division, except that now it has become markedly adversarial.

Kelantan and Terengganu are now controlled by Pas, as they were in 1959.

Malay disunity is not above reconciliation. Pas was a founding party of the Barisan Nasional (BN) on June 1 1974, but it was kicked out of the BN in November 1977.

I shall not talk about the causes of its ouster because I was then languishing in the Kamunting detention camp. I did, however, know a few things about why Pas joined the Barisan Nasional because I played a role in its formation and in persuading Pas to join BN.

I am not altogether surprised why Pas refused to join the Malay Council (a proposal which was put forward by a junior minister), for two reasons: Datuk Dr Rais Yatim is perceived as having no political clout in Umno. He is not even an Umno divisional head. The cogent reason, however, as indicated by Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor, is because he wants to be the hegemon of the Malays and Malaysia.

In Greek, a hegemon was a leader among the ancient warring Greeks who sought hegemony. Pas wants to be the leading party among the Malays and Malaysians.

The word hegemony was popularised by Mao Zedong when he advised the Chinese communists not to seek hegemony, but instead to dig deep tunnels and store grain.

When Beijing and Moscow split, the word "hegemony" became the crucial epithet of Mao's denunciation of the attempt by Moscow to dominate Chinese communism.

Likewise, western European communist parties, when showing their independence of the Soviet Union, used "hegemony" as their attack word. However, "hegemony" was first used as the attack word against US imperialism.

Pas is determined to wrest power and the leadership of Malays from Umno, and plucky Umno is dedicated together with its allies in the BN to deny the anachronistic Islamists the opportunity.

Between 1948 and 1960, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) wanted to establish through a violent insurrection "the dictatorship of the proletariat". The British and Malayan authorities euphemistically called it the Emergency. Pas, on the other hand, wants to impose through Malaysian democracy and manipulating Islam the "Islamic hegemony".

I do not believe there is good reason for a Malay Consultative Council. The Malays had the First Malay Congress when they were united in their opposition to the Malayan Union. But when fighting for independence, the Malays were disunited as a minority of them wanted to continue living under the protection of the British Raj.

The Malays now have two fiercely competing parties - Umno and Pas - whose raison d'etre is to fight, protect and promote Islam and its Malay adherents, their language and other legitimate interests as well as that of the non-Malays as provided for in the Constitution.

The difference between the two antagonists is that Umno is a well-trying and tested ally of the non-Malays whereas Pas is the supposed angel the non-Malays don't know.

The rift on the ground is real, but as I have said it is not irreconcilable. They will regroup provided there is something big which threatens Malay political primacy and the special position of Islam.

Umno is stable under Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Lamenting its loss of 22 parliamentary and 55 State assembly seats and the State Government of Terengganu serves Umno no useful purpose. Neither is feeling worried that it could really become irrelevant to the Malays.

Umno knows what to do: it must engage in a process of renewal. Dr Mahathir has said in London that it will be done and the sooner the better.

The "Anwar Ibrahim factor and the Chinese chauvinist challenge" linger, but with a bit of political adroitness these can be contained.

Many people believe, including moderate Malays and Muslims, that the real source which can cause political instability is Pas' ferocious and relentless ambition to turn Malaysia into an Islamic theocratic state.

In a nutshell, that is the real cause of the Malay disunity today albeit the Anwar case did contribute to it. I shall be untruthful to myself if I did not say this.

It's now more than two years of incessant politicking; the nation and all of us need a break. Let us give Dr Mahathir and Abdullah a chance to secure the support of the majority of mainstream Malays and Muslims and sustain the backing of non-Malays.

Dr Mahathir and Abdullah have got to develop a certain feel for what it is that will work with the post-1999 Malays while simultaneously keeping other Malaysians within the tent.

There are things which Dr Mahathir and Abdullah will have to do and cannot discuss with people, and if that in the long term is good for this multi-racial nation then they will just have to do it.

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