

11/12/2000

The politics of protest and hate

Abdullah Ahmad

IN PRACTICAL politics, a demonstration is a show of force or indignation, or both. A dangerous culture of protest and demonstration has developed in Malaysia with encouragement by pro-no holds-barred democracy campaigners and foreign media.

As a result, there seems to be a belief among the anti-government forces that the BN government should first be delegitimized and then toppled at any cost. The opposition is fostering demonstrations and protests to achieve what they had failed through the ballot box during the last general election.

The opposition, I believe, is out to test the government's patience and resolve. It plans to make the politics of protest, hate and demonstration an increasingly significant part of its ideology.

In fact they will welcome any firm retaliation by the Government as it would be more fodder for their PR purposes. Any action by the Government will act as a symbol of cruelty and brutality, which will only be exploited and cleverly manipulated to win over more minds, amongst the unsuspecting public, to their cause or to further fan the flames in the hearts of their already indoctrinated followers. They will, of course, keep the people in ignorance of their real intent.

The opposition, Pas and Keadilan in particular, is not out merely to embarrass the Government but to capture it. The Government and its leaders have been cursed by almost every derogatory and rude epithet one can think of (even then, newer names and descriptions are still being regularly coined and used), but Dr Mahathir has survived them all, as has the Government and UMNO.

In spite of all this, I feel sorry for Putrajaya if it still does not realise the seriousness of the oppositions politics of protests, hate and demonstrations. It is, as I see it, an open act to challenge and defy the government at every turn, at every opportunity that presents itself, in order to delegitimize Dr Mahathir's administration.

If the Hong Kong protest against Lee Kuan Yew being given an honorary doctorate were shaped by the experience of the June 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, which was brutally crushed by the People's Liberation Army, I wonder what event or person has shaped the attitudes of Malaysian protesters?

If Putrajaya finds the pattern of demonstrations not disturbing, I do. I think it is just the beginning of other types of protests yet to unfold. If the Government is not tough, we shall see a great deal more of these demonstrations in the run-up to future by-elections or the next general election itself.

Please get this right: Pas and its junior associates are working together simply because they want to oust Dr Mahathir from Putrajaya. They may quarrel later on, but for now, they are working jointly to win the hearts and minds of the rakyat, in no longer subtle ways, to put them into power.

Pas is very adept in the use of Islam and Malay nationalism (the latter only if it suits them), as we have seen, and for any one still unconvinced that Pas poses a real threat, he or she should seek help immediately. Like the Communists, Pas projects a heady idealism that encourages committed men and women to be martyrs. These people can be mobilised to wreak havoc in the streets or kampungs, as we have seen in Lunas, at the drop of a

kopiah (skullcap).

Be forewarned. There is more to this than the seemingly obvious fact. We are fighting to redefine the political future of this multi-religious and multi-lingual nation. We have overcome all sorts of challenges in our 43 years of independence, but I reckon, however, this is the most defining moments in our political history. BN's struggles are also your struggles. Of course this is only so if you believe in political and cultural pluralism.

In 1951, Pas was founded by a splinter group of UMNO leaders. In the 1980s, another similar group formed Semangat 46, which came back into the fold after a decade in the political wilderness. Yet again, two years ago, a third group established Keadilan, which is now Umno's bitterest bete-noire. The Pas-Keadilan-Parti Rakyat axis wants to establish an Islamic People's Republic. Pas is now actively cultivating the Chinese and Indians into its Islamic fold, whilst its Islamists are formenting and subverting the Malays. Pas and Keadilan have infiltrated various agencies and are involved in clandestine politics with sympathisers here and overseas.

In the 1950s, President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, provoked a civil war in Indonesia, aimed at transforming the character of Sukarno's Indonesia to fit Washington's prescription. They failed but their successors have succeeded. Just look at Indonesia now.

Likewise, in the new millennium, what is to stop foreign parties from secretly financing, in particular, dissident Malays, encouraging them to take on the government through agitation and demonstration and by other means if they think it suitable or necessary?

Ponder, for a moment, about past and present involvement by foreign parties in Asia, particularly in West Asia.

What do they care? They want to foist upon us their ideology and belief lock stock and barrel without considering the situation on the ground. If the situation really turns ugly or goes awry, their people can be helicoptered out of danger, or their governments will charter planes to whisk their people and some fortunate locals away. But seats are limited. What happens to those who get left behind in the shambles?

They will go back and pontificate and try to rationalise with the benefit of hindsight, as is always the case. To them, it is all right to suffer as long as you follow their system, but it is wrong to prosper and live peacefully if your system is not sanctioned by them. There are countries in this region, deemed more democratic, or are going through a so-called re-birth on the road to democracy. Would any of us swap places with citizens of those countries? Do we want to take ten steps backwards so that the next step can be the correct one in the eyes of some? And what if the next step is still wrong? They are not going to come over and sort out the mess. They'll say it's part of the growing up process. It's okay, take twenty years to sort yourself out and come back to see us when and if you do. In the meantime, we have other more pressing things to sort out.

In the end, will it really matter to them? No, because it is not their country. Will they admit responsibility? No, not for a long time if ever, because the arrogance of their belief will prevent them from doing so even if they wanted to.

We will revert to being a backwater, another basket case. They lose their investments, but to those whose country it is, these people lose livelihoods and their way of life, if not more.

Admittedly, this is a worst case scenario. Many will argue that the chances of it happening are remote, that I am sensationalising the situation, but the fact is it can happen. At the beginning of the 1990s, who would have conceived that Indonesia would have endured what it has in

the past three years? It only takes one spark to start a conflagration. If this were ever to take place here, I hope I won't be around to see it happen.

No doubt I will be criticised for bringing out the foreign bogeyman issue to distract attention from internal problems, but these are my views. And we are encouraging people to express their views and opinions, are we not? I thought I should remind readers that there are precedents of past covert interventions in Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and other places though all failed. Those interested to know more can read Subversion as Foreign Policy by Audrey R Kahin and George MCT Kahin.

The Government's hitherto good record lies in its ability to manage internal disorder and conflicts, except in Lunas where "volunteers" took it upon themselves to check people's identity cards and to direct traffic.

In recent past, demonstrations and receptions welcoming "heroes" released from prison have become rather frequent. More can be expected in future if the Government continues to take this serious threat diffidently and on a hit-or-miss basis.

(END)