

27/07/2000

Time to end politics of distortion

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THE Malays must sort out their chosen political destiny fast. Our politics has become distorted as the arms heist and the accusation about the Sauk incident (that it was staged-managed) have been amplified.

The longer we grope for the favoured political route, the more intense, protracted and murkier our politics will become. Worse, we will be vilified by those who come after us for failing them, for squandering their future, for not giving them a chance as we are often engulfed in petty quarrels.

Our economic future and standing are inextricably linked with our present political conduct. We are fascinated by trivialities and are routinely persuaded into senseless, heated argument. We need first to rigorously analyse our political behaviour and the interaction of emotion, loyalty to individuals, zealotry and extremism in Malay politics.

True, Umno has its flaws. The common wisdom, however, is that the unfettered display of emotions resemble the brand of politics of Pas.

The party will vehemently deny this indictment. Yet you see supporters who are unbending, and deeply loyal to their leaders, whose pictures adorn their homes. Women in the party are consigned to the periphery. Pas' chosen slant on religion, its murky attitude on competitiveness, efficiency and educational excellence is rubbing off onto others. We see perfectly sensible, educated parents sending their children to religious schools, and narrowing the options. True, we must churn enough clerics. Still, saying NO to excellence and success is folly. We seem to be retreating to "safer waters" in the heat of frenzied competition.

I risk being severely criticised for this. However, it would not stop me from standing up for those girls who are being prepared for "domesticated" lives as housewives after school or even after tertiary education.

Women are assets, a fact symbolised in the tradition of Prophet Mohamad S.A.W., who consulted his wife Siti Khatijah, on many matters. Her vocation in business and trade was never a point of contention. Khatijah, in our modern terminology was a career lady. More than 40 per cent of our workforce are women and about 65 per cent of undergraduates are women.

This means that women will become the primary contributors to the nation's Intellectual Capital, an important factor of production. Are we going to deny them their rightful place in nation-building? More importantly, are we going to deny ourselves this precious asset?

Pas must come clean on these combustible issues, and come to terms with its role in the rising political temperature. Take the constant diet of fire-breathing speeches at the ceramah. It works in a funny way. Essentially it is meant to promote the party to the nation. Yet those who turn up are all supporters. They don't go there to be persuaded. Why the trouble then?

They may actually be seeking entertainment that leads to a vicious cycle. Because when they clamour for entertainment, the likes of Muhammad Sabu must deliver to remain relevant. Pas speakers are under immense pressure to reciprocate, by insulting their opponents and regaling the crowd who keeps baying for more. The supporters are subtly being indoctrinated. Pas may not set out to sow hatred, just to win votes. Pas cannot pretend, though, not to see that its political methods are pitting Muslims against each other.

Rancour has become ingrained in Pas. It momentarily reared its ugly

images at the start of the new Dewan Rakyat term, through angry protests. Must we hate each other in the first place? I am convinced Datuk Fadzil Noor is not hated by Umno members. But speak to the archetypal Pas supporters and they spew fury at Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. They seem most susceptible to stray talk and rumours. All this senseless politicking is messing up our future, when we should be churning out Malay trial lawyers, scientists, engineers and IT experts. Of course, we must all be devout Muslims. There shall be no compromise on religion. Yet religious pursuit must co-exist with excellence. I have my doubts whether Pas is getting the delicate equilibrium right.

Likewise, the resurgence of Islam cannot be mistaken with Pas' interpretation and presentation of religion. It is naive to assume that the status quo will not be disrupted under a non-BN Government at the centre. The balance is delicate. Without clear policies on a range of issues from the quota system, economics and education disparity or even a credible stance on extremism, a victorious Pas will bring confusion and uncertainties. Plainly, the whole nation will be compelled to make adjustment, painful ones.

Leaders of Pas will be anxious to provide guarantees that the disparate interests of Malaysians are to be respected. Still, at the end of the day the clerics are destined to win the major arguments within Pas. They are the fulcrum of the party. My questions - Are they clerics first or politicians first and foremost?

Expressly, the democratic choices before us are stark. We do need to make a decisive choice on our destiny first in our minds and later through the ballot box. In a way, the Sauk episode will prod us to decide faster. Pas has been quick to dissociate itself from the terrorists given the political ramifications. It is obvious, however, such zealotry is absent in Umno, which is why I think Pas is beginning to worry. It has awakened to the dangers of its reckless political methods.

The way forward is for the Malays to be united under the Umno banner. Umno has to correct some flaws, of course, and for this it has the severe electoral setbacks to thank for. Jolted by the Pas inroads in the November general election, Umno has strengthened discipline in its ranks. There is renewed enthusiasm. There has to be more openness and candid discussions. Individualism must be able to thrive within Umno.

In sending its message across, the party will have to tirelessly ram home key messages - that the nation has to stick to religious tolerance and moderation, and that there are equal opportunities in this land of plenty.

Malaysians ought to be reassured that Umno is for wealth creation and wealth acquisition through ethical means. Umno's big advantage is that its simple goals should rightly appeal to everyone. It is a timeless party with no sell-by-date.

I think that ultimately it is the fear of any form of extremism that will become a rallying point for Malaysians and a uniting force for the Malays. It is now time to deal with the destiny of this beloved country. It is not impossible for Malaysia to degenerate into a hardline nation, something like Iran, which is now having second thoughts about their interpretation of Islam.

This is where the rejuvenation of Umno will begin. As a further step forward, I say the party must now embrace a major cause. And, the one cause that cuts across party lines is education, education, education. The people must be trained to loath mediocrity because economic might is the saviour of Muslims.

Pas supporters, too, would want its children to succeed. They may talk about the simplicity and a spartan life but deep down they are haunted by

insecurities. They too want to travel and lead the lives of a middle class. For the sake of the nation, Umno has to be strong and to be strong, it must take a cause that touches everyone. I suggest that Umno launch a massive education campaign in poor areas.

As a small example, Umno can arrange to pay qualified English teachers to give tuitions in the kampung, get the young to love books, arts and music. English will help bring the Malays forward. Of course, it will not be at the expense of the undeniable importance of Bahasa Malaysia. We have to be good at language to get into the world of Information and Communication Technology. It will not erode our nationalism or the Malay features in us. It will instead enhance our self-esteem.

Umno is an Islamist, nationalist party that is pragmatist and progressive and promotes religious tolerance. Granted, Umno will have to get better to be attractive to the more sensible supporters. Yet, it remains the undisputed choice.

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