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What next for BN after Lunas?

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IN EARLY September, I told a group of young Singaporeans during a speech organized by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the Nanyang Technological University that political Islam and Anwarists would wait for a priceless opportunity to flex their political muscle; that they were waiting for the moment they figure the Barisan Nasional (BN) was staggering under political fatigue, languishing or in a state of rhapsody, whichever came first, before striking. Lunas handed them the occasion last Wednesday.

Machiavellian realpolitik threw any remnants of whatever principle Barisan Alternatif had out of the window and the Keadilan-PAS-Parti Rakyat axis overran DAP's objections, when by right the latter should have fielded the opposition candidate in the by-election.

But the axis demanded and got the ticket, and it was vindicated. Keadilan's Saifuddin Nasution's victory was not unexpected. BN's S. Anthonysamy or any one else would have lost because the odds against the ruling party and Datuk Seri Samy Vellu were too high. There were the issues of the Malay divide, the vision schools, religion, racism, language, the allegations of corruption, abuse of power, lack of transparency, cronyism and collusion that were presented to the voters with ingenuity and conviction by the opposition.

BN was hard pressed to effectively counter the multitude of allegations effectively and/or coherently. Thus, BN was always on its back foot whilst the opposition exploited the situation and kept up the pressure.

The Lunas result should not have left BN and MIC bewildered. The writing was already on the wall. Only the Indians voted overwhelmingly for Anthonysamy and even then not wholly. Please do not repeat the argument that the defeat did not necessarily mean it was the rakyat's indictment of BN. Of course one can argue against it persuasively too, but such a contention is tantamount to a white-washing and non-acceptance of the fact that there exists a general disapproval amongst voters of the performance of the government and hence the rather quick erosion of BN's mass support in one of its traditional strongholds.

The ruling party has never lost Lunas since 1959 and only last year BN won the seat with a comfortable majority (4,700).

In Lunas, we witnessed a larger-than-hate political phenomenon, but again that should not be an excuse. It has been suggested that the defeat reflects how little Umno has done to protect its existing turf despite much trumpeted pronouncements promising reform and broadening of its appeal to recapture the hearts and minds of the Malays, especially the young voters who will form about two-thirds of the projected 1.3 million plus voters that will be voting for the first time in 2004.

Lunas is proof that democracy is alive and kicking, only too well, in Malaysia. A perplexing question, however, looms at the heart of Malay politics and even Malaysian politics. What has happened to Umno, or rather what is taking place in the party? The Government and ruling coalition are up against the opposition front that was and is in trouble caused by the machiavellian political opportunism, and still the rulers and their political machinery failed in Lunas.

According to Datuk Shahril Samad, a member of the Umno Supreme Council and a traditional critic of the Prime Minister, it was the case of Dr Mahathir being in a "permanent state of denial over the deteriorating

perception of the public towards the government and Umno" (quoted from the Asian Wall Street Journal, December 1-3, 2000.)

At this stage of the political cycle, the BN and Umno ought to be, seriously speaking, always one step ahead of their opponents. But it is not. By any reckoning, Lunas was a demonstration of abject political failure. Having said that, given the evidence I have, it is still not too late, but Umno has to have the political will and stomach to do what is required. Many people have tried and are still trying to persuade me that Umno cannot win the next general election. I have hitherto told them that Umno still has a chance to win the next polls.

Umno has failed to make any impact on the Malays because the party appears to them, and to a growing number of young bumiputras, not to be in political vogue. It is also seen as abandoning the interest of the majority in favour of a favoured minority. This perception still persists and is still badly hurting the party.

As witnessed in Lunas, there was a simple lack of stomach for the fight and of kampung-wise political instincts. Time and again, the Umno leadership, except for Dr Mahathir, who seemed to be fighting the battle alone, failed to exploit the opposition fronts difficulties and contradictions.

Most of Umno's leaders and ministers are content with their government or semi-government jobs and are happy to allow the media to make the running when it comes to criticising and attacking the opposition and their friends. Perhaps one of the reasons is, except for Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi and two or three others, they are largely anonymous.

I have on many occasions, through various newspapers, stated that the other reason Umno is in its current plight is because it lacks focus. I meet all sorts of people now and all are speaking or writing to me with great candour, wondering what it is that Umno stands for in the year 2000 and beyond. All they see at the moment, according to them, is a party gazing at its navel, telling and retelling old tales, fighting old internal battles and of people jockeying for positions and succession. What is there to succeed if Umno loses the next polls? Abdullah Badawi told the Straits Times Singapore last week that people should go easy on party politics, and instead, concentrate on ensuring Umno governs the nation. He also said if the ground sentiments amongst the Malays remain negative towards the party, there is a good chance that Ministers could fall by the wayside even before the party polls. Worse still if Umno was so consumed with internal politics, it could end up playing second fiddle to PAS. What is the use of becoming a leader of a party that is not in power? Much of the rush, says the Straits Times, is created by the aides and supporters of the three Vice-Presidents, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Umno must accept that the PAS-Keadilan-DAP coalition (if the latter remains in the opposition front) threat is real, very real indeed. I believe DAP will opt to go alone again because there is an absence of any similar fundamental principle between DAP and its partners. They are brought together only by their visceral hatred of Dr Mahathir.

I may, of course, be wrong, but the Malays, I feel, want a strong and transparent leadership from Umno, not a party reacting to events. Sometimes the impression created is that the Umno leadership is not saying what it should be stating and fighting for what the majority wants.

Get back to the grassroots again, and until Umno shows that it has an attractive vision of this nation's future for Islam (the difficulty is that Umno cannot try to out-Islamise PAS, for it cannot and should not attempt to do so) and the Malays, and can pull them together, the party's

future, many fear, cannot be very bright.
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