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Address the Muslim anguish

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CHARLES De Gaulle said politics is too serious a matter to be left to politicians and I suppose, because of that, ASLI keeps on inviting me. Whatever, half of the people will risk their lives for the same things the other half view with alarm.

Here is what I told guests of the Asian Strategic Leadership Institute (ASLI) over lunch at the Sheraton Imperial hotel in Kuala Lumpur yesterday:

"During the last 10 months, I have spoken at various functions on the state of Malaysian politics. Today, I have been asked to give an update on the Malaysian political scene. Has anything changed, if at all, in the past half a year or so?

"Whilst the core dynamics of Malaysian politics have not inherently changed, the geo-political and economic upheaval resulting from the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have, I believe, critically affected the direction and emphasis of Malaysian politics, especially those of the Opposition.

"The terrorist attacks have, also, only served to underscore the fundamental tenet of Malaysian politics; that it is politics based on race. We are not yet mature enough as a nation or as a people, collectively, to accept non-racial politics.

"This is not because we do not wish it so, but because of our history, about which we can do very little. This is what we have been bequeathed and we have to do our best to make it work as smoothly as it can possibly be. And I think we are doing a good job.

"Since September 11, we have seen the final demise of the very short-lived, so-called multi-racial Opposition front to challenge the ruling multi-ethnic Barisan Nasional.

"The DAP has lost faith and now prefers to be on its own, not wanting to be associated with the kind of Islam and Islamic state that Pas advocates and proposes to implement if they attain power. They, quite rightly, want nothing to do with Pas' street demonstrations and the latter's call for jihad against the US and its allies. "The DAP, instead, is trying to find a way of regaining the trust of its predominantly Chinese constituents, the trust that it had so expediently and ruthlessly pawned off when it was blinded by delusions of grandeur and decided to dance to Pas' tune in 1999. It was, quite simply, political lunacy on DAP's part.

"Within what remains of the Opposition front, we can already see the beginnings of intra-party fratricide. Keadilan, always the weaker Malay-based party in the Opposition next to Pas, seems to be even more rudderless, wracked by internal politics reminiscent of the goings-on in Umno not so long ago, and struggling to find a place of relevance for itself in the national political scene.

"Some of its top echelon leaders have left or are leaving, paving the way for what many see as the 'Abimisation' of Keadilan. In other words, further Islamisation of the party. So, what now of Keadilan's proposed merger with Parti Rakyat? More importantly, what now of Keadilan itself?

"Any party associated even in a tangential way (or marginally) with militancy has no chance in Malaysia," so said Chandra Muzaffar (October 29 issue of Time magazine) currently still the deputy president of Keadilan, though not for much longer as he is not putting himself up for re-election.

"Perhaps, he now realises that Keadilan has finally driven itself into a political dead-end or cul-de-sac. Which perhaps explains the Abimisation as a lifeline for its survival and/or relevance alongside Pas' radicalism.

"All this, of course, should be music to the ears of Barisan Nasional (BN) leaders. However, I hope they won't be lulled into complacency by the sweet voices of the sirens. If anything, BN, and Umno in particular, whilst being given a fresh lease of political life, still has a long way to go to drag itself out of the hole it has dug for itself.

"We have suddenly found or rediscovered long-lost friends abroad. All of a sudden, it appears that they need us just as much as we need them. But how long will this last?

"Post-September 11, Umno and its leadership, whilst commended abroad for being models of moderate and progressive Islamic governance, have a battle to placate the very real anguish of Malaysian Muslims, many of them moderate, over the inadvertent killing of innocent co-religionists in Afghanistan and in Palestine and elsewhere. But this anguish is not something that arose with the commencement of recent hostilities.

"It is something more ingrained, intrinsic and deeply rooted that has everything to do with the issue of Palestine and the West's seemingly unwavering support of Israel.

"To many Muslims, here and abroad, the targeting of Muslims as the 'enemy', despite belated attempts by the West to retreat from ill-chosen but passionate words, such as 'crusade' and 'infinite justice', only serves to underscore their belief that there is a religious divide in the conduct of the West's foreign policy.

"There must be progress on the Palestinian issue before there can be any winning over of Malay and Muslim sympathy for the predicament faced by the West. First of all, there must be a clear demonstration by Washington that it will rein in Israel's excesses. Anything less will be seen merely as lip service with no real intention or conviction.

"Without progress along these lines, it would remain extremely difficult for the Malaysian Government, however much it wishes to work together in the war against terrorism, to come out openly with unconditional support for the West.

"After all, Umno is dependent on its constituents and they can still be swayed if it does not play its cards wisely or with enough political savvy. Pas is ever ready to move in and exploit the Malay anguish.

"It should be quite clear to all present here that the battle royale in Malaysian politics is and will always be between Umno, together with the other component parties in the BN, and Pas. The other Opposition parties have to regroup, rethink and rediscover their relevance, if any, after being duped and manipulated by Pas.

"The events of September 11 can be a double-edged sword for Umno and the BN. Play their cards shrewdly and the Opposition could possibly lose all the ground that it has gained, except in Kelantan and Terengganu. Whatever happens elsewhere, it is my reading of the situation that these two states will remain under Pas control.

"What's preventing Pas from completely segregating the sexes is money. Once the Kelantan and Terengganu governments have funds, women-only offices and sports complexes will be the order of the day.

"If Umno leaders want to regain the hearts and minds of the Kelantanese and the people of Terengganu, they know what to do. They will have to start addressing, and quickly too, the root political and economic causes of the people's rejection of and continued spurning of Umno. The question is simple really: Do they have the political will to do what it takes to improve the situation there?

"I do not believe they have the political will. So it will be status quo

which strengthens my arguments that Pas will continue to rule the two north-eastern states.

"That notwithstanding, I am told that nation-wide Umno is creeping back into acceptance by Malays because of the on-going improvements in the domestic political situation. Party membership is on the increase. Many who left it three years ago are returning. My only worry is the state of the economy. If it holds, we are all right, even better if it improves.

"On the other hand, self-delusion, incompetence and complacency will only drive moderate fence-sitting Malays into Pas' waiting embrace.

"Pas uses divine threat and portrays itself as Allah's party that can guarantee followers places in heaven. Of course, Pas is not God's party but it is, whether you like it or not, perceived to be so by many Malays.

"Meanwhile, Umno leaders could do worse than start with a crash course in Islamic religion and Arabic.

"Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, nevertheless, continues to yield political benefits because he has worked hard and taken measures that appear to have the support of a vast majority of the people. His position in the Government, and in Umno, remains entrenched.

"Still, much remains to be done. Umno still has a long way to go to shape up and to rid itself of the taint besmirching and defaming its name. It will have to clearly demonstrate that a leopard can, in fact, really change its spots or it will have a tough time in the next elections, although it is my honest opinion that it will still win.

"Ironically though, despite the best efforts of Umno and BN, it may well be that what happens to the balance of power in Malaysia and to many other moderate Muslim states in the world, may be dependent on the course of action taken by a few of the most powerful countries in the world.

"Once again, we may be left with what history bequeaths us, through no fault of our own, and it would be up to future generations to make the best of it that they can.

"Many people have ignored previous warnings about religious fanaticism, to their own loss. The wise have begun to distance themselves from the fanatics; the foolish hope they will just go away.

"They were impassioned in the belief that they were irresistible in 1999. All these people are not alike but all are prepared to die for their political belief: that those who kill infidels will be martyrs."

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