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Barisan parties need to adopt joint approach in wooing the people

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BARISAN Nasional held its national convention on Saturday after a lapse of six years, drawing more than 3,000 delegates from all over the country to the Putra World Trade Centre.

Critics may view this as a "too little too late" and that the coalition is now hitting the panic button after its poor performance in the 1999 general election.

But, this is probably far from the truth judging from the upbeat mood and confidence displayed by party leaders debating BN chairman and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's keynote address.

The significance of the gathering taking place at the Merdeka Hall of PWTC, Umno's annual general assembly home turf, also did not escape the attention of observers.

Said one: "BN hopes to ride on the strong spirit of unity and consolidation demonstrated by Umno, the coalition's backbone, at its annual assembly held less than three weeks ago."

He added: "If Dr Mahathir delivered a wake-up call to the Malays at the Umno assembly, we can say he made the same call to BN members at the convention."

It is certainly not too late as there are still three more years to go before the country goes to the polls.

True, so much water has gone under the bridge since 1999 but if the spirit of BN leaders as shown at the convention is anything to go by, it looks like the 13-member coalition has taken stock of the situation and renewed their confidence to take on the Opposition in 2004.

Taking the cue from Dr Mahathir, all the leaders emphasised the importance of going back to the basics and for BN to act as one, working in unison against the Opposition, especially in neutralising the Pas-style brand of politics.

If their action is as good as their word, then the Opposition has a lot to worry about. They can no longer thrive by default, they can also kiss goodbye any chance of defeating BN.

But if the commitment and determination shown at the convention is all hot air, then the nation leaders have everything to worry about.

The first task is for the component parties to clean up their own backyard before unity in BN will have any meaning or bearing.

Almost all leaders agreed that the battle ahead was to win the hearts and minds of the people, thus the need for BN to go down and meet them.

But how many are really prepared to do this? And if they do, are they well-equipped to face the society with its new demands and outlook?

Borrowing Dr Mahathir's terms, the society now especially the younger generation is more "brutal and hostile" as they no longer feel indebted to the independence fighters and the Government that brought peace and development to the country.

The Prime Minister conveyed the message loud and clear - look for a new approach to ensure the people's continued support as relying on BN's past achievements is no longer tenable.

But for years, BN has been relying on this track record to convince the people on why it should be allowed to continue running the country.

It is now the responsibility of the coalition leaders to sit down and draw up plans on new ways in winning the people's hearts and minds.

Hurling accusations and sowing hatred are popular tactics devised and

put into practice by the Opposition but there is no need for BN to reciprocate in a similar fashion.

There is no other choice for Umno and partners but to go on the offensive and to unmask the real characters of the Opposition.

In 1999, their main objective was just to deny BN its two-thirds majority in Parliament.

But for the battle ground of 2004 when the general election is expected to be held, bolstered by their fine showing in the last general election, the Opposition has now set their eyes on forming the next Government.

For too long BN component parties have been acting on an individual basis, especially between the Peninsular-based members and those in Sabah and Sarawak.

(Out of the 13 BN component parties, eight are from Sabah and Sarawak.)

Their close co-operation is only apparent during general elections where the BN's dacing symbol takes centre stage.

Dr Mahathir, in his 70-minute off-the-cuff keynote address, reminded BN leaders on the importance of enhancing co-operation among themselves, solving problems together and ensuring that the coalition functioned as a party rather than a coalition.

What is imperative now, he surmised, was to regain the coalition's strength in winning the general election.

As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, BN was a unique coalition, one invention of Malaysia that should be registered. Many world leaders have expressed their interest in learning how 13 race-based parties could work together without much bickering.

It is this uniqueness that should be harnessed and strengthened. After 43 years of existence and co-operation, BN should have no problem taking on the Opposition parties and its fragile front which is now in danger of collapsing due to opposing ideologies and policies.

Logically, the Opposition's barisan tiruan (imitation front) will not be able to face the onslaught of a united BN.

Dr Mahathir also suggested for BN meetings at all levels to be held more regularly. At State-level, it should take place at least biannually, and if possible, four times yearly as such meetings could help enhance co-operation.

He said closer co-operation would result in a much stronger and united coalition in facing present challenges.

Besides meetings, individual party programmes and activities can easily be turned into a "BN affair".

For example, if Umno organises a meet-the-people session in the kampung, other component parties need not have to wait for an invitation to participate or lend a helping hand.

As pointed out by Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik at the convention.

"When MCA or Gerakan enter the new villages, does it mean there is no place for Umno. If there is visit to the longhouses, why can't all the leaders go? If this is done, it will create a lasting impression on the people that BN is united and work as one."

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