

10/07/2001

Choosing between BN's ability and Pas' ambition

Abdullah Ahmad

MOST Malaysians take their existence, lifestyle and religious tolerance for granted; at least, most of the time. The Government, however, has never taken it for granted because of our innate racial and religious vulnerability.

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, stated last weekend that a Malaysian race or Bangsa Malaysia was already in place and eventually the ruling Barisan Nasional (made up of 13 largely communal-based parties) coalition would emerge as a single party. But the process and progress will necessarily be slow.

Until such time we will have to contend with political mobilisation based on race or religion. Despite what Dr Mahathir said, I'm afraid, for specific reasons, racial tensions have been exacerbated rather than reduced. Yet, thank heaven, peace, prosperity and harmony have prevailed.

I must stress this in case you have forgotten: both support and opposition to the Government have largely been channelled through communal mobilisation. Since the last general election, the Opposition has centred around the Malay Islamic based Party Islam or Pas, the Malay-based Keadilan and the Chinese-based and led Democratic Action Party or DAP.

Dr Mahathir has led the BN to an electoral victory for the fifth time and, I believe, he will lead the BN again in 2003-4 or whenever the election is held. The BN will win, as he said last week, though it will not be easy nor cheap.

For sure, Umno suffered reverses, (losing 22 MPS and two State Governments). For a party that was always used to performing well it was a severe blow. However, neither Umno nor BN has become irrelevant to Malaysia as many of its critics have wished.

The 1999 Opposition success was achieved during an extraordinary time of political turmoil, partly beyond its control and partly self-inflicted: Asian economic and financial crisis, Anwar Ibrahim and other debacles plus general disenchantment and even fatigue.

The Anwar Ibrahim issue was at its peak then, and unless the Government mismanages itself and its damage control continues to be bad, I do not believe Anwar will be a determining factor in the eleventh general election, though it will remain one of the campaign issues.

The main battle will not be between militant Chinese chauvinism and Umno nor Anwar and Dr Mahathir, but a door-die clash between Umno and Pas which is bent on creating a theocratic, purist Islamic nation, even unilaterally. Pas has stated and reiterated this for the umpteenth time.

That will be the mother of all battles which will once and for all determine whether Malaysia as we know it now lives or perishes.

DAP cannot stop Pas' burning desire. Pas knows it, so does DAP, which will be reduced to fighting a sideshow with MCA. DAP's co-operation with Pas in 1999 gave the latter a new realism. DAP illuminated the risks and how to avoid them.

BN must begin planning to face the challenges of Pas in the next two decades. Pas is never going to give up on something it considers its destiny.

Pas' members and supporters are like Benito Muscolini's Fascists or communists. The Islamists in white skull-caps or kopiah and white robes, normally sporting a beard or goatee and moustache accept orders from the party without discussion, only obedience.

Pas appears to be doing well among a particular group of Malays because Umno seems tired and unable or unwilling to change to confront a changed and shifting situation. This happens despite the poor performance of the two State Governments the former runs. Pas spins stories and articulates programmes better; its propagandists and spinners more captivating and imaginative even when quoting the Quran and sayings of the Prophet for their own political ends.

If the devil can quote scripture (Quran) as we all know, why not a politician?

Under Pas' Islamisation I can tell DAP there is no hope of seeing its so-called ideological construct - a Malaysian Malaysia - being incorporated. DAP is exchanging today's Malaysia with Pas' Islamic Malaysia.

Actions speak louder than words. If that is Pas' maxim and, if true, the Chinese, Indians and non-Kelantanese Bumiputeras should be allowed to own land in Kelantan.

As Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh both are lawyers, they know deeds speak louder than pledges, especially in landownership and other individual property rights and when freedom to choose are at stake.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Let the non-Kelantanese and non-Bumiputeras buy and sell land as freely as in other states.

Pas, helped by DAP and Keadilan, fought several issues on Umno's turf and, sadly for Umno, it succeeded because Pas cleverly co-opted many issues which were Umno's. The Islamists deftly pushed for transparency and against cronyism injustice and corruption; more accountability in government, and so on.

By contrast, Umno stuck to its worn-out though well-tested strategy. It did work, but just. Umno forgot the best defence was to attack. It neither had a new policy nor was able to promise something startling to capture the imagination of the young middle-class Malays and the rural voters.

Umno must arrest forthwith this perception that it is passive. It must do something enchanting politically, which is crucial not just for its own electoral victory but for the success of everyone under the Malaysian (hot) sun.

BN is not perfect, but its concept of moderation, balance and multi-racial co-operation and religious tolerance is being challenged by Pas via its BN copycat alliance. The BN is the best thing that ever happened to this polyglot.

For 46 years starting with the KL Municipal election in 1952, the Malays and the Chinese have been cooperating politically, joined by the Indians in the 1955 general election until now. I believe it will go on if Malaysia as it stands today is to survive, otherwise it will be replaced by a theocratic, purist Islamic and Malay-based nation.

The choice is simple; improvement of the status quo, goodwill and religious tolerance, or extremism.

In education, especially higher learning, the Bumiputeras will have to be assured they will not lag too far behind the other Malaysians. Everything must be done to encourage them to reach the standards of their non-Bumiputera peers.

The new ruling to enter university is timely but it will be effective only if rules are scrupulously implemented, without favour or fear.

Similarly, the non-Bumiputera component parties must regain (greater) credibility, and to my mind the most important issue is accessibility to higher education, especially in public universities and institutions, notwithstanding, the announcement about the Tunku Abdul Rahman University.

While Umno robustly defends Malay special position and privileges its leaders must not be terrified of exposing Bumiputera economic back-

wardness due to fears of feeding racist assumptions about the abilities of Bumiputeras and their children.

Take the cue from Dr Mahathir by exposing their depressingly low achievements in schools and universities.

But without talking about and diagnosing the problem, how can it be addressed? Umno must seize the moral and political initiative on race and education: that bilingual education is imperative for the Bumiputera's future well-being as well as that of the nation's, in a global village.

Lowering standards in education, like insisting on studying only in Malay-medium schools is bad for the future of Malaysia. It's like attempting to condemn the Bumiputeras to poorer education than their Chinese and Indian brethren.

Since the early 1970s when politically correct only Malay-medium education began, I am afraid education has suffered dramatically.

English, the language of knowledge, is as good as dead in the majority of our schools yet just five decades ago, Malaysians were considered very good in the language by everybody.

Instead of playing defence, Umno needs a radical new approach to this important issue and other problems like drugs, AIDS, indiscipline and amorality, serious crimes and broken homes, and so on.

For sure, and to be fair, Umno's record has been remarkable, but all that is in the past. But, alas, its current performance is perceived by many as unimpressive. Not tinkering with or not changing policies is not politically savvy.

Umno and BN leaders need to be fearless in facing the obvious. Malaysians are now more open-minded, better educated, more prosperous and live longer, and the ruling group must expect them to continue making political and social demands which may appear excessive and even radical.

The solutions are, either Umno changes to accommodate the perceived needs of the younger and better exposed Bumiputeras and other Malaysians, allowing them to test the limit of the Government's tolerance or counter-attack on what are now the Opposition's strongest issues, preferably in public debate.

I know Dr Mahathir can handle it. Are the others who go to Putrajaya every Wednesday listening?

(END)