

06/01/2001

Lowering the political temperature

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UTUSAN Malaysia has fought doggedly to keep afloat the Malay unity theme throughout Raya, weathering a torrent of protests from Keadilan Youth chief Ezam Mohd Noor and Pas Youth chief Mahfuz Omar in the process.

The paper elected to overlook those little sneering comments from Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat and Pas leader Datuk Fadzil Noor too in favour of their broader support for the unity concept.

The nation was then bustling with the Hari Raya festivities. Many were full of their political views and too eager to force them onto less forceful friends and relatives to read the newspapers, I suspect. Malaysiakini, the unabashedly "semi-official" Opposition website as some pundits see it, rewarded itself with a 10-day vacation, thus writing itself off as a shaper of Malaysian minds.

That Utusan persisted with the theme should excite students of Malaysian politics and journalism. We are all too familiar with the traditional roles of each newspaper. Our dailies may have not moved away from the old style of journalism that relied heavily on official sources, pronouncements and run-of-the-mill speeches; neither have the dailies offered constant daily analyses and big-picture articles; but there is little doubt that Malaysian newspapers have a soul.

There is an ideological slant about their raison d'etre. Perhaps we have inherited an element of British journalism - the powerful right wing Press has only contempt for Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair. The alternative Press arrived belatedly on the Malaysian journalism scene; and reacted fastest to the Internet revolution.

Now that the Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Pas president Fadzil Noor and Keadilan leader Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail have all said, "All right we shall talk," will they actually meet?

What will they talk about? How will that meeting bridge the widening Malay political chasm? The brightest spot in the Malay unity spectacle is the hope that hostilities will subside.

Hostilities and the new brand of Malay politics are inextricably linked. Stridently opposed (at least they appear to) to the unity talk are Mahfuz who, remember, is the Palestinian hero "who was jailed by a tyrannical regime for protesting against the Jewish State", and Ezam whose promised New Year gift to Malaysians is a potentially unnerving year-round gala of street protests.

Ezam needs to keep the political heat alive. If it ever subsides, Ezam and his backers fear that the "disenfranchised" voters may again embrace sensibility and objectivity.

Like Keadilan, Pas operates in an environment of political intensity. And Pas needs a new symbol to ride what it sees as a wave of anti-establishment feelings. It has gleefully harvested the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim political crop.

Now Pas secretly fears that the former Deputy Prime Minister may compete for the big prize once Barisan Nasional is out of the way. Pas badly needs fresh symbolism. It will cling fastidiously to the wang ihsan matter, or anything potentially combustible.

Which was why a Mahfuz rival in Pas, Dr Hatta Ramli, rushed to organise a demonstration outside the Treasury while Mahfuz was in jail. When Mahfuz emerged "triumphantly" from the prison gates, he moved to seize the

initiative from Dr Hatta who happens to be the political secretary to Fadzil, the Opposition leader. They are competing to impress Fadzil.

It is perfectly democratic for politicians to try and keep a political momentum going, but the rest of us must be intellectually agile to intercept and call the bluff.

There is a need for proper and deep political analysis. We need political literature to help the unwary see rhetoric and trends in the correct perspective.

Example: Ezam and Mahfuz have steadfastly singled out a personality in their political struggle - Dr Mahathir has been senselessly and endlessly vilified. Ezam and Mahfuz have relentlessly tried to create a friction between the haves and the have nots.

Ezam has been schooled in a tradition of demagoguery and scapegoating - powerful tools for reactionary movements. Pundits say this technique is routinely deployed to channel anger over insecurities, personal failings and uncertain social status towards scapegoats that are easy to blame. It is certainly not new.

Peter Fritzsche in *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany*, said the Nazi movement began with middle-class populists launching bitter attacks against both the government and big business.

In theory, demagoguery cannot work in present-day Malaysia as prosperity has reached the far corners of the country. The NEP has produced a strong Malay middle class. There is a virtual full employment situation and poverty is at a low six per cent. Yet populism is always a useful tool.

Look at Joseph Estrada in the Philippines, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, elements of the Malaysian Opposition manifestos or the various past populist regimes in Latin America - Juan Peron in Argentina, Getulio Vargas (Brazil 1945-1954); Chile (1970-73) and Nicaragua (1979-90).

The battle lines ahead of the next general elections have thus been drawn.

The debate on the role of Pemuda Umno continues unabated. Reinvent, some commentators thunder. Change, another observer roars. I think Pemuda Umno should bring the simple Umno message to the masses - the campus, grassroots, professionals.

Umno is the party that brings opportunity and hope. It needs to engage Malaysians. It needs to talk (and listen) to them in small groups. The days of mass gatherings are over.

The enlightened Malaysian is not about to sit for hours listening intently to speeches. We need fresh-faced spokesmen who will write to newspapers, produce books, participate in the Internet debate, and appear on television.

The message of hope appears mundane. But it works. Umno has touched in a profound manner the lives of every Malaysian family and shall continue to do so for many more years to come. Newspapers will have to re-invent themselves too.

Provide space and incentives for intellectual debate. Visit the campuses. Get or prod academia to write and participate. The Umno MPs too should let Mahfuz and gang do all the heckling while they focus on the substantive issues. Reach out to the professionals for inputs and ideas.

The Malay unity talks, meanwhile, must proceed, for there is a need to lower the political temperature and allow Malaysians to get on with our lives.