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Opposition thriving on hostility

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BY now, it is quite apparent to some people that efforts to realise the Umno-Pas Malay unity talks may be an exercise in futility.

Pas is just not interested, end of discussion.

Umno can come up with all the facts and figures it likes to prove just how much the future of the Malays, the supremacy of Islam and the well-being of the nation as a whole depends on it.

It won't matter.

There is nothing there to entice Pas, no political mileage to be gained.

Pas cannot be blamed for thinking so. It is a political party which meanders or accelerates on political mileage.

What can it gain from agreeing to attend the talks but the probability of finding common ground with Umno on the survival of the Malay Muslims and the position of Islam as the official religion.

A more pertinent question to be asked is what Pas stands to lose if it agrees to attend the talks.

The biggest loss for Pas would be the advantage of thriving in a hostile environment.

Imagine the nation's reaction, especially the Malay Muslims', should Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Fadzil Noor come out from the meeting and hold a joint Press conference.

Stretch the imagination further and see the two leaders with a common stand on defending Malay and Bumiputera rights and upholding the sanctity of Islam as the official religion.

The first reaction, especially from those on neither side of the Malay political divide, would be one of gladness with the hope that the gap between the two can be narrowed.

For Umno members and its supporters, such a sight would reduce the sting of insults and derogatory remarks Pas has hurled at them over the past couple of years.

For Pas members and supporters, such a sight would reduce their hatred and anger towards Umno and allow them to accept Umno members as fellow Muslims.

The non-Malays would receive the message that the Malays are clear about what they want.

And knowing what are the sensitivities of the majority of the population would help the non-Malays to bargain for a more equal society while ensuring peaceful co-existence for all.

Scenarios such as these can only spell a less intense political atmosphere and will definitely reduce the hostile political climate.

Surely, only good can be expected to come from these circumstances. Otherwise it would be like having to live in a power keg of a nation.

But these would not augur well with Pas and especially its ally, Keadilan.

The latter's efforts to promote street demonstrations as frequently as possible would not receive the number nor the intensity required to achieve its objectives.

For Pas and Keadilan too, such an environment would negate all their political efforts since 1998, especially their very successful promotion of hatred towards Umno and the Government.

In fact, a change in climate now would be a spanner in the whole approach of the political strategy outlined and pursued by Pas and

Keadilan since the 1999 general election.

Prior to the 1999 general election, Pas and Keadilan worked intensely and exclusively on the Malay votes.

They left the DAP to woo the Chinese and Indian votes.

Pas and Keadilan's campaign strategy then, apart from using the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue, was to prove Umno's ineffectiveness.

Malay Muslims had to be convinced that Umno had not defended Malay rights and privileges effectively.

Moreover, they had to be convinced that Umno had not been strong in upholding Islam.

Keadilan's campaign speeches then, especially in rural Malay areas, were laced with accusations of how Umno had betrayed the struggle to improve the Malay lot.

As for Pas, it continuously used the issue of how Umno had allowed Malay Muslims to abandon their own faith and embrace other faiths, especially Christianity.

Some even went to the extent of accusing Umno of allowing more churches to be built in some parts of the country than mosques.

These political approaches worked to a certain degree in reducing the Malay support for Umno as proven in the outcome of the general election.

However, the DAP failed to deliver the crucial Chinese votes.

The DAP lost a lot of ground because the Chinese were uncomfortable with its "unholy" alliance with Pas which they viewed as an extremist party.

A number of non-Malays were openly criticised by their Keadilan-supporting friends for being the reasons behind the failure of the Opposition to at least deny Barisan Nasional a two-thirds majority win.

After the general election, it was obvious that the Opposition was not ready to accept the results amicably.

Their efforts to prolong the intensity of political activity in a hostile environment persists to this day.

But their strategy then took a different turn.

Instead of focusing heavily on the Malays they turned their attention to the non-Malays, particularly the Chinese.

The Malay-inclined political party Keadilan donned a multi-racial cloak.

And its efforts have been quite fruitful of late.

Its recent success in winning over DAP stalwarts lends weight to its claim of being a multi-racial entity albeit simultaneously rendering the DAP redundant in the loose Opposition coalition.

Pas too has made an effort to show that beneath its extremist garb lies a benign interior in so far as racial and religious tolerance is concerned.

Its Perak chapter, for example, issued a joint statement jointly with the DAP and Keadilan that it would allow entertainment outlets such as pubs and karaoke joints to operate in the state if the Opposition took power.

Indeed, it was a major about-turn.

In the past it had attacked Umno relentlessly for allowing such outlets to operate in the country.

But the biggest "coup" was the support Pas and Keadilan gave Suqiu, whose demands obviously questioned the special rights of the Malays and Bumiputeras and the superior status of Islam as the official religion.

To ensure that the hostile environment prevailed amid their efforts to secure Chinese support, some of the Pas and Keadilan leaders were prepared to offer themselves as a buffer should Umno members attempt to question Suqiu over its demands.

Confident that the majority of the Malays backed them, they were prepared to champion the Chinese "cause" in the event of a head-on

conflict with Umno Malays.

Their remarks, apart from insinuating that Umno Malays were out to destroy the Chinese, were also heavily laced with threats of physical conflict if need be.

Remarks from Pas central committee member Dr Hatta Ramli and Keadilan information chief Ruslan Kassim which appeared in some Opposition websites on Feb 1 this year prove just this.

"Let Umno be warned.

"They would have to step over the dead bodies of Alternative Front (the loose Opposition coalition) Malays before they can harm the Chinese.

"Also be warned. There are more Malays in the Alternative Front than there are in Umno.

"We will stand between Umno and the Chinese," Dr Hatta was quoted as saying in the Free Anwar Campaign and Pas Party websites.

Ruslan was also quoted there as saying:

"How many Malays are there left who still support Umno? Most Malays are now with Reformasi.

"We will form a wall between Umno and the Chinese. As Dr Hatta has said, if the Umno Malays want to kill the Chinese, they would have to kill us first. They would have to step over our dead bodies to reach the Chinese."

Since these remarks were highlighted, both Dr Hatta and Ruslan have been quoted in the Malaysiakini Internet news portal as claiming that their "over our dead bodies" remarks were made in reaction to reports that Umno Youth had threatened to burn down the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall which housed Suqiu.

Regardless of the reasons, the promotion of the words "kill" and "over our dead bodies" is obviously an effort to perpetuate a hostile environment and to fan emotions.

It is also obvious that the remarks were made to win the hearts of the Chinese.

These are clearly the planting of political seeds which are to be reaped in the next general election.

But such seeds cannot grow in a calm and peaceful climate.

They can only germinate or perhaps sprout slowly in a tense atmosphere.

And for that, Umno and Pas must not meet lest the heated political climate is cooled.

But Pas and Keadilan too should realise, in their single-minded wooing of Chinese support, that they may have lost their perspective and not realise what they have become.

For they are now very much like two bald men fighting for a comb.