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PBS journey home reflects the dynamics of Malaysia's race relations

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THE Seafood Village is no household name to the hip crowd who frequent the trendy Bangsar hangout area.

But while the "cool ones" prefer the joints which blare out the latest music, the Seafood Village had for the past six months been host to an "East meets West" political exercise.

The "East and West" here is not global in nature but, rather, within the context of Malaysian politics.

It was at this establishment that East Malaysia-based Parti Bersatu Sabah leaders met the political players from West Malaysia.

They met to look into the possibility of PBS rejoining Barisan Nasional, the coalition the former left three days before the 1990 general election.

The PBS had then joined the self-styled Gagasan Rakyat, an opposition front led by Semangat 46.

These recent meetings, held mostly at night and sometimes continuing until past midnight, bore fruit when PBS president Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan handed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Thursday the application to rejoin BN.

With that the tasks of the backroom boys, be it political secretary to the Prime Minister Datuk Johari Baharum, close aides to Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Pairin's deputy Dr Maximus Ongkili, appear over.

Such things are expected in any political negotiation.

Then again, the fact that Dr Mahathir's men and Abdullah's aides worked together meant that the leaders themselves were in together on the issue.

Furthermore, there was nothing "black and white" in the negotiations, meaning that it was all based on a gentleman's agreement and mutual trust.

Based on feedback from PBS leaders, it was obvious that they trusted Abdullah enough to feel comfortable about throwing in their lot with him.

Now it is up to the top BN component leaders and Pairin himself to ensure the PBS returns home to roost.

That should be the end of the story.

However, what transpired during the "clandestine" meetings and the implications of the PBS application to rejoin actually provide good lessons on Malaysian politics, past, present and the future.

In the first place, if the PBS wanted to rejoin the BN, then why the need for so many meetings?

Obviously, it was not that easy for the PBS to come to the decision and neither was it that easy for the BN to accept it.

When the PBS pulled out from the BN in 1990, the coalition leaders were very bitter, describing the act as one of betrayal and a stab in the back.

Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun, the president of Usno, the other BN component in Sabah had described the act as not of a human being but of a kucing (cat - probably the late Tun had no better word to use).

Tun Ghafar Baba, then Deputy Prime Minister, warned, "If the Opposition wins, PBS is saved ... if the BN wins, jaga (watch it)."

But much water has flowed under the bridge since the 1990 general election.

By the 1994 Sabah state election, Mustapha had joined up with PBS and he was together with Pairin at the gates of the official residence of the Sabah Governor to ensure that Pairin was sworn in as the Chief Minister.

However, a few weeks after that, several PBS assemblymen crossed over to

BN. It caused the party to lose its majority in the State Legislative Assembly and paved the way for BN rule.

Since then, the PBS has remained an opposition party in the State.

It is also interesting that during the clandestine meetings, some of the details behind the pullout cropped up, putting the whole episode in new perspective.

For one, Pairin and Dr Maximus kept on saying they were ill-advised.

The irony of it is that those they accuse of having advised them to leave the BN, had returned to the coalition much earlier and have held important posts in the Sabah BN Government.

But such ironies are common in politics.

Semangat 46 and its president Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah too abandoned their cause, and Razaleigh has been embraced by Umno and BN wholeheartedly - the former appointing him a supreme council member.

Yet, the PBS decision to apply to rejoin the BN at this stage can be quite significant, as a political analyst from a Malaysian think tank reflected.

"After the Sept 11 tragedy, the world was talking about the clash of civilisations vis-a-vis the West versus Islam.

"Yet, in Malaysia, the PBS, identified as a majority Christian party, is prepared to work with the BN which is led by Umno, a Malay Muslim majority party which had recently declared the nation to be an Islamic nation.

"While it reflects the dynamics of Malaysia's race relations, it also proves that political parties like PBS and Umno are not of the extreme end of their religions."

That is the present.

For the future, if the PBS is accepted into the BN fold, then it means Sabah will deliver the seats to the coalition, making it almost formidable in East Malaysia.

This is especially true if the mood shown in the recent Sarawak State election persists until the next general election.

With both States expected to deliver for BN, the coalition will get into the next general election with almost one-third of the parliamentary seats in its grasp.

And that can be quite demoralising for the opposition which has already lost some of its lustre following the withdrawal of the DAP from the self-styled Alternative Front, leaving only Pas and Parti Keadilan Nasional in its fold with the less influential PRM waiting in the wings to be absorbed by Keadilan.

It is hard to imagine that all these possibilities and the re-writing of the Malaysian political script were actually done at the Bangsar Seafood Village.

At least it can now proudly claim that it was host to the Malaysian version of East meets West.

But it should remain unpretentious and let the rest do the shouting.