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Umno must return to the people

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WHEN I agreed first to be his political analyst (in 1962) and then his political secretary in 1963, I never suspected Tun Razak had signed me on (as it were) for the political lesson of a lifetime. I was then 25.

Now at 64 (in July) my self-appointed mission is to inspire a new generation of Malaysians to get involved in public service, and if I could make politics accessible (for the clever people) and fun (for everybody) more and more Malaysians would feel energised to participate.

I must warn you, though, that tough battle awaits you. Most of the incumbents want the management floor only for themselves or for those that they favour.

The controversy over the use of the word "Islam" is over, at least for the time being. Some had wished the Malay Rulers conference had taken a harder line than it did whilst others thought otherwise.

That anyone should have even thought there should be a ban on its use suggests a lack of intellectual depth. Perhaps lacking a sense of political security is nearer to the truth.

Whatever, political stability and a tolerant multi-religious society remain central to the ruling party's agenda. What concerns me is how Umno (and the Government) can refashion its message, regain the public's trust on various issues and position itself to become the majority party in the 11th Parliament.

We are governed everywhere. The arguments the politicians give to support their right to rule differ across a spectrum as broad as the languages and dialects in which the messages are expressed and passed on.

Pas' goal is to replace Umno and establish an Islamic state pronto. Ultimately, Malaysians will get the government they want, or are conditioned to want the government they get.

Pas' polity (a set of behaviours) has a political culture (a set of Islamic beliefs).

Pas, in a way, is like a communist party; it firmly believes in the domino theory: That if one strategically placed state in a region goes Pas, the others will follow quickly.

In September 1959, Terengganu Umno fell to Pas, followed by Kelantan (Umno won only two State seats and a single Parliament seat) - a feat Pas repeated in 1999. Then, State elections preceded the parliamentary election. From 1964 they have been held simultaneously.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the president of Umno and Prime Minister, stated that Umno's downfall in the two States was because Umno leaders were complacent and did not go down to kampung as they should have done.

Umno was and is an essentially a kampung-based party although it now has also many members and supporters who live in towns and cities.

Pas held Terengganu only up to October 1961. It lost to Umno via defections engineered by Tun Razak and never regained it until the 1999 general election. In Kelantan, Pas maintained its rule continuously until 1978 when it lost partly through the machinations of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah who, ironically, 11 years later (in 1990) also helped Pas to recapture it from Umno.

It has ruled the state since then and it looks set for a long innings.

Pas has renewed its belief in the domino theory. In its ceramah (mini-campaign) the story goes like this: We have a row of dominoes (states). We have knocked down the first one after 38 years (Terengganu) and the next

one will be Pahang. We have already caused the beginning of a disintegration in Umno which will have the most profound influences.

It does occur to me, not suddenly in fact, that if it could happen to dominoes it could happen to States too. Pas, to many Malays, is a party of do-gooders. It tells the Malays one thing, and to the Chinese with whom it desperately wants to share its bed, quite another.

To the Malays: don't go near Umno; for Pas is holier than Umno. To the Chinese, We are not a tribal party like Umno. We love the Chinese more than Umno does!

Pas seriously believes even the Chinese are gullible in politics. Maybe there are some politically ambitious (and desperate) Chinese who want to stake their future with the Islamists.

Still, I don't believe in Pas' historical inevitability as I did not in the inevitability of communism even after South Vietnam fell because its defeat was wholly predictable. I wrote about it in the Op-Ed Page of the Liberal Houston Chronicle in Spring 1962 when I was a guest reporter for three months.

Ours is a classic case of a plural society. Even though everything is based on religion, race, language and still pretty much divided by economic role, I do not believe an Islamic State as envisaged by PAS - scrupulously based on the Quran, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad and syariah law and jurisprudence - is feasible.

The maintenance (and strengthening) of inter-racial and inter-religious harmony has always been every government's objective because it is the foundation on which all other targets rest. Racial politicking has of late exacerbated what seems already a febrile situation.

Make no mistake, conservative Pas supporters are not like the compassionate conservatives. They want an Iran-type Islamic state while enlightened Malays and other Malaysians want status quo retained, preferably a secular state.

Pas has been stridently and boldly plotting establish an Islamic State, and to its credit it said so openly in the kampung and to urban Malays.

Pas thinks it can do so sooner than expected with the support of the DAP, Keadilan and Parti Rakyat. Pas considers these people as its prize. Innocent supporters who have, to its great surprise, wittingly and unwittingly have come over offering their helping hand to oust the hated Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Muhammad.

Pas is adept at confronting a changed and changing situation. For Pas the Rulers conference's decision is both a reprieve as well as respite. It will abide by the fatwa only when it suits the party.

Once it governs, the party's Islamic name will be entrenched and all bodies, organisations and institutions using the word "Islam" will sprout like mushrooms. To a little extent, it already does: Parti Islam, Insurance Islam, hospital and hotel Islam.

As for Umno, it should not be too unhappy, really. The Umno-led government has let the misuse and exploitation of Islam go on far too long. The Umno leadership was over-confident that Pas would never reach its current level of acceptance and therefore decided, despite repeated calls by its grassroots that the word be banned, benignly to ignore it instead of nipping it in the bud.

Pas even warned it would stage street demonstrations if it was forced to drop Islam from its name. Pas, I know, would not have dared utter such a threat in the Seventies, even in the Eighties.

Umno's consolation is that Pas must now tread its political course scrupulously lest it be labelled, punished, and even the fatwa reviewed if it openly transgresses or infringes it.

Though there is no restriction on the use of the word "Islam" by any

organisation; indeed it is encouraged within the context of knowledge disciplines, enhancement of the faith and compassion, people misusing Islam to confuse Muslims or for deviant purposes are punishable under existing laws.

More importantly, a person is a Muslim upon meeting all the obligations and abiding by the five pillars of faith and Islam.

No additional qualifications (like membership of Pas) are needed. Therefore, it is wrong (sinful) to believe that affiliation with and proclamation of support for a specific group (Pas) is a prerequisite to be deemed a Muslim. Anyone who preaches or speaks of this is a deviant and is punishable.

Only Allah has the absolute right to determine who goes to heaven or hell (Pas or its leaders)

Umno must not make Pas' name an excuse for its weakness. It has fought Pas in all the elections that were ever held in this country since 1955 and beat it handsomely most of the time. Umno has never lost to Pas except in Kelantan and Terengganu. It must show it respects and upholds the fatwa and democracy. It can still win against Pas provided it relearns political and PR skills.

While it seeks to better opportunities in the civil service, the police, the armed forces in schools and university for all Malaysians, there is no other time which seems more propitious for Dr Mahathir to face squarely and quickly the internal ructions in Umno.

What he does is bound to be controversial, even heated, but his political antennae must have warned him that the alternative (not to do anything drastic) is suicidal. The Umno leadership and establishment are perceived no longer connected to the Malay grassroots.

To Pas, under Islam the end justifies the means. It is perceived as a party which has strong Islamic convictions.

Yet strong conviction is exactly what's needed in Umno. The majority of Malaysians who voted BN during the last general election don't want an Islamic state. They would prefer status quo, good healthcare, economic prosperity, good schools, freedom, peace and stability, transparency, efficacy and trustworthiness among their governors.

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