

31/08/2001

Year of mergers and dissolutions

Ramlan Said

A BUSINESS deal which turned into a political controversy, Umno having Chinese members and a by-election victory each for Barisan Nasional and the Opposition were some of the high points colouring the country's political scene over past 12 months.

Other highlights include the launch of a new wing in Umno to attract young Malay women, a ban on political ceramah for national security and the possible disintegration of the alliance between DAP and Pas.

But the shocking news was the revelation on the existence of a militant group - allegedly led by the son of the Kelantan Menteri Besar - bent on toppling the Government through violence instead of the ballot box.

It was also a year that saw Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad clocking 20 years of service as Prime Minister, a feat which made him the country's and Asia's longest-serving leader.

Taking over the leadership from Tun Hussein Onn in July 1981, Dr Mahathir is synonymous with what Malaysia is today - vibrant, dynamic, progressive and a leader of the developing bloc.

Even his staunchest critics admit that credit has to be given to the visionary Prime Minister and the steps he has taken to realise his dreams.

Like the proposed merit-based system for universities, a radical measure which according to Dr Mahathir was needed to stop the rot among Bumiputera students, some of whom were more involved in partisan politics instead of concentrating on their studies.

On the political front, the past year can be regarded as one of mergers and dissolutions.

Dr Mahathir broached the prospect of the BN one day emerging as a single party instead of a coalition of race-based parties.

The idea won support from component parties but everybody was realistic enough to agree that the process of integration and assimilation should be carried out gradually.

In a way, the Sabah-based Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat could be credited as starting "the ball rolling" when the party was dissolved, with members joining Umno en masse, providing the latter its first Chinese members as thousands of Akar members were of that race. With Akar's demise, Barisan Nasional now has 13 members.

The Indian Progressive Front, which has applied to join the BN for years, meanwhile held a referendum in February to decide on the party's future.

Denied of a membership in the coalition following MIC's constant refusal to support its many applications (admission into BN has to be unanimously supported by all members), IPF toyed with the idea of a "back door entry" - by merging with one of the existing BN members.

Delegates were given three options - keep the party intact, join the MIC or join the People's Progressive Party. They chose to keep the party alive.

The merger mood has also hit the Opposition, where Parti Rakyat Malaysia is set to be inducted by its younger partner, Parti Keadilan Nasional.

The country also witnessed several corporate deals that were inevitably intertwined with politics.

The most controversial was MCA's acquisition of Nanyang Press Holdings by its investment arm, Huaren Holdings, although president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik took great pains explaining it was purely a business

decision.

The deal, which caused a split right in middle of the party, would not have been that controversial if not for the fact that the NPH publishes the Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press dailies.

Vocal opposition came from Chinese associations, guilds and organisations which felt the two newspapers would lose its independence once they were controlled by a political party.

The issue was "officially" settled when the majority of MCA delegates voted to endorse the deal at a special general assembly but a ruckus at the Youth annual general assembly later showed the confrontation in the BN's second dominant party was far from over.

The rumbles continued though, with many analysts concluding the battle between the two feuding sides to resurface next year when the party elects its top office bearers.

The MCA is not the only party with domestic problems on its plate.

For the Opposition Front, their troubles are much worse. The already fragile cooperation, often dubbed a marriage of convenience owing to the conflicting policies and ideologies of its members, is on the verge of a break-up. Its two dominant members, Pas and DAP, are on course for a head-on collision over the former's insistence to set up an Islamic state if it comes into power.

DAP is adamant that Malaysia remains a secular country. As Pas is equally adamant about its stand, the front is on the brink of a collapse, surmised many political analysts.

Senior leaders of both parties have met several times to remove the thorns from their relationship but the deadlock has yet to be resolved.

For Umno and Pas, the psychological war between them has turned more intense, with the stalled unity talks serving as the grim reminder that Malays and Muslims in the country are still divided.

At the same time, Umno's re-engineering process continues to be on track.

The party's supreme council approved the formation of Puteri Umno, a wing to attract the participation of the younger generation of Malay women said not to be interested in joining the party.

The reason: they are put off by the image of Wanita Umno, a drab and uninspiring movement perceived to comprise only of makcik-makcik (older women).

Puteri Umno grabbed immediate attention especially when it appointed popular singer and actress Erra Fazira as a committee member - a move much derided by detractors but hailed as a coup of sort by others.

She has since relinquished her post, saying her busy schedule did not leave her much time for party work.

Pemuda Umno introduced its "Pemuda Masuk Kampung" programme where leaders and members integrate more closely with the people through various social and economic programmes.

The party demonstrated its determination to wipe out money politics when the disciplinary board suspended more than a dozen members, including division leaders and a State assemblyman, for violating rules during the divisional elections.

But everyone is waiting with bated breath the outcome of the board's investigations into allegations of money politics in his division by Beserah assemblyman Datuk Fauzi Abdul Rahman, who has also declared his intention to vacate the seat.

Besides money politics, Fauzi also lodged a police report over the manner timber contracts were awarded during the tenure of former Pahang Menteri Besar Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, now Information Minister and Umno secretary-general.

Pas, meanwhile, has cried foul over the decision to ban political ceramah, its most effective tool in winning the hearts and minds of the populace.

Its president Datuk Fadzil Noor is seeking a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to argue the party's case against the ruling.

For another member of the Opposition, Parti Keadilan Nasional, the year was dominated by the slipped disc suffered by former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his request to be treated overseas. The request has been rejected.

At the polls, the BN and Opposition locked horns in two by-elections in the last 12 months, with the results tied 1-1.

In December, the Opposition scored a major upset when Parti Keadilan Nasional candidate Saifuddin Nasution Ismail defeated a BN candidate in the Lunas by-election, held following the death of its former assemblyman who was gunned down.

Buoyed by the victory, the Opposition was confident of defeating the BN again in the Likas by-election in July. But the writing on the wall was clear from the beginning that BN would romp home victoriously, what more with the Opposition failing to agree on fielding a single candidate.

BN candidate Datuk Yong Teck Lee, the constituency's former assemblyman, warded off the challenge from Parti Bersatu Sabah, Keadilan and an independent candidate.

The former Sabah Chief Minister not only won but did it convincingly, polling a higher majority compared to the votes obtained in 1999.

The victory vindicated BN of claims that Yong's earlier victory was helped by phantom voters - the main contention that compelled the staging of the by-election.

The Kota Kinabalu High Court had earlier declared the results of the 1999 Likas election null and void, ruling the electoral roll used contained the names of non-existent voters.

With the people still reeling from the shock that phantom voters existed in the rolls, Justice Datuk Muhammad Kamil Awang dropped another bombshell when he revealed in his judgment that he had been directed to dismiss the two petitions filed over the Likas 1999 election result.

The police have launched an investigation into the allegation and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim told newsmen recently the case had been forwarded to the Attorney-General's Chambers for a decision.

Still on Sabah, a new Chief Minister, Liberal Democratic Party president Datuk Chong Kah Kiat was sworn in, replacing Datuk Osu Sukam under the State's unique rotation system for the Chief Minister's post.