

02/05/2002

A lame duck Opposition

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I AM here at your invitation again to present a picture of my feelings and thoughts about Malaysian politics at the present moment.

I will talk to you tonight very simply and very sincerely about the things that are in my heart and in my mind, based on the subject you all chose for me - Political Changes in Malaysia: Democracy and Participation.

When people discuss the political changes in Malaysia over the past few years, they usually zero in on two defining events: the economic crisis beginning in mid-September 1997 and former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's case in September 1998.

I would add another much-neglected factor, globalisation. Nominal as it may be, it has influenced the expectations of the educated and middle class on the Government, political process and the civic space.

The Government, under the leadership of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has successfully managed the economic and political crises.

It was no easy task. He had to navigate through the hazards of the Anwar factor and the undercurrents of dissent, even within Umno itself.

Where the economy was concerned, he took the "ourselves alone" road to recovery: the then-maligned selective capital controls and monetary expansion policy, which were designed not only to salvage the battered economy but also to keep domestic business and the middle class on board.

I have always said that the middle class, especially the Malays, tend to forget that it was the New Economic Policy (NEP) and National Development Policy (NDP) that created them and Dr Mahathir's unconventional policies during the economic crisis that kept the middle class afloat.

Otherwise, they would have suffered the same fate as their counterparts in Indonesia, Thailand and South Korea whose lives of comfort were severely impacted by the region-wide economic and financial crash.

The culminating effect of the economic crisis and the political crisis was a kind of political fluidity, unseen even during the Umno split in 1987.

First, it was how the ruling elite, the Opposition and the rakyat negotiated this political fluidity that shaped the contours of the political landscape. The results, which I will go one by one later, are: the formation of Parti Keadilan Nasional - a creature of the reformasi movement; the more aggressive politicisation of Islam by Pas and the challenge to Umno's hegemonic rule; the emergence of an organised and, arguably, a strategically-positioned opposition; and the loss of affection among some Malays, particularly the young and the various professional classes, with Umno.

The rakyat was said to be in a nasty, cynical and distrustful mood, a mood exacerbated by the sense of insecurity over the then-economic uncertainties.

I would add here that we are no stranger to a political crisis spawned by an economic crisis.

Let us briefly go back to the recession of the mid-80s. When the country's economic growth faltered in the mid-80s, it became a catalyst for the Umno split, a parallel to the split caused by the Anwar issue which came on the heels of the mid-97 economic crisis.

The mid-80s economic downturn too had caused opinions in mainstream Malay political and corporate circles on the NEP to split between pro-growth and pro-distribution positions. The parallel in the mid-97 economic

crisis was the strong invocation of the CCN - corruption, cronyism and nepotism - which were, again, blamed on the NEP, NDP and other government policies.

These became one of the rallying themes for the reformasi movement, especially Anwar's allies, and you would recall that this was the theme of the coded assault on Dr Mahathir during the 1998 Umno general assembly.

I dare say that for several reasons, the reformasi movement, embodied in Parti Keadilan Nasional, will die with a whimper.

The Anwar ouster could not sustain the viability of the party. As an adopted symbol of reformasi, it is hard to dispel the uncomfortable notions that underlie the symbol and what he claims to represent.

Keadilan and, I suspect, his staunchest supporters and even long-term associates could not rationalise Anwar's own culpability in all the issues abhorred by themselves, such as Anwar's part in the privatization programmes, the award of contracts and his dealings with business cronies, several of whom were hard-core Chinese.

Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah's role as president of the party was supposed to offer the party and the overall reformasi movement a perceived respectable image.

But ultimately, the imagery is just that: a semblance of something concrete. Without actual substance, without a platform of ends and means that is coherent, marketable and distinct from the competition, it will turn into a mirage.

Equally crucial is the inability of the party to develop debate and political discourse beyond the drama of the Anwar affair itself.

It has been suggested that the emergence of Keadilan will be the impetus to non-racial politics.

I think we will move towards non-racial politics by natural and gradual progression, but it will not be by or because of Keadilan. It will be led by Barisan Nasional.

It is something to hope for. However, I do not believe non-racial politics will become a reality for a long time to come.

Pas, I think, is assuming a strong contextual role in shaping the Opposition discourse.

But this time around, Pas traditionalism has given way to a new approach - although still reactionary in its substance - of reaching out to others, particularly the young, from kindergarten children to university students, and instituting dialogues with various groups.

Students, idealists to the core and naive to their fingertips, are easily swayed by the religio-political overtures of Pas.

In post-crisis Pas, there is a new generation of educated professionals with extensive links to other Islamic groups who play a key role in influencing the leadership, explaining Islam's non-fundamentalist side and organising party representation not only here but overseas as well.

I understand that this group within Pas has been forging links or networking with groups in neighbouring countries, especially Brunei under one of Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat's sons, in Thailand, Australia, the US and Middle East countries.

Pas is trying very hard to bring non-Muslim intellectuals and political forces into the Pas-Islamic orbit of thought.

God help them if they trust Pas. I commend them to re-read Mark Anthony's oration upon the dead body of Julius Caesar and think hard about it.

Pas has assured non-Muslims they would be treated fairly. If this were so, it is good, but look at Kelantan. Neither non-Malays, except those who are Kelantan-born, nor Malays, unless they are Kelantanese, can buy land there!

I have said this before in my columns that Pas, the Islamic tiger is as dangerous as the once powerful communist tiger, perhaps even more dangerous because it's a political and religious combination. Some say Pas is a serpent!

Forget Keadilan. In reality, Reformasi is Pas in a thinly disguised form. It is using reformasi as a convenient front, representing a liberal image by being engaged in mainstream social issues and by being receptive to other opposition parties.

Below the surface, however, Pas' traditionalism is very, very intact. It's highly theocratic, conservative Islamic theology is non-negotiable.

Kelantan and Terengganu are a pale shadow of what its intentions are when it wins the centre.

Pas is intent on a theocratic state, whether or not the majority is with it.

Its post-crisis project is to use a more mainstream political and civil position to mount a challenge to Umno and build, strategically and intellectually, an alternative to Umno and Barisan Nasional.

Post-98, the Pas project is the integration of Islamic, non-Islamic and reformasi opposition. It took place during the 1999 general election, which saw Pas replacing DAP as the main opposition in Parliament.

Pas is trying hard, very hard in fact, to present itself as pseudo-modernist Islam. But I think it would be very difficult, arduous and tough for Pas to hijack the genuine modernist Islam project from Umno.

But all the same, there must be quick and adequate intellectual responses from Umno.

As for power-sharing with non-Muslims, it is just in the name of political expediency. It would not even share real power with Semangat 46, which was one of the causes of their split.

Given the reality that Pas would need its own two-thirds parliamentary majority or considerable coalition support to initiate its version of an Islamic state and since neither scenario is likely, I think we are quite safe from the talibanisation of Malaysia, or even its Vajpayeenisation.

But Malaysians of all races must not take things for granted.

DAP is like Eurydice in Greek legend, a virgin martyr shared between the tyrants Hades and Paulidor, both of whom were power-crazy.

The wilting virgin, starved of power, has lost its moral ground by going to bed with Pas and Keadilan. As a watered-down version of a social democrat party, it has failed itself.

There have not been many offerings in terms of socially democratic reformism that challenge, for example, the prerogatives of the market.

Instead, it is Dr Mahathir who is at the forefront in calling for the regulation of the financial capital market and architecture of the international monetary system and this explains why social democrats around the world support Dr Mahathir rather than Lim Kit Siang's DAP.

I know for sure that the French intellectuals and politicians highly respect Dr Mahathir, among many other foreigners.

I would list DAP's failures as follows: first, a failure to offer a democratic socialist alternative.

Apart from criticising government actions as a matter of course and invoking the infamous CCN and other foreign mouthings for anything and everything, there has been no credible riposte to BN policies on public spending, taxation, privatization and social services.

Second, its fixation with its Chinese electoral base and what is perceived to be the leadership's deep-seated ethnic chauvinism.

Even in the Barisan Alternatif, it assumed a hostile and non-bargainable position towards Parti Rakyat.

This is indicative of DAP's narrow, sectarian party politics and the

attempted monopolisation of the opposition space for immediate political and careerist reasons.

What are the political challenges posed by the changes for the Umno-led ruling coalition? Alexis de Tocqueville in Volume 1 of Democracy in America said: The political parties that I style great are those which cling to principles rather than consequences, to general and not specific cases, to ideas and not to men. These parties are usually distinguished by nobler features, generous passions and more genuine convictions.

I would offer this advice to Umno and the Barisan Nasional components. They must be more open and democratic, and infuse themselves with new blood, particularly at divisional and grassroots levels, amongst women if they are savvy.

For sure, Umno must be dynamic and in touch with the grassroots. Umno's past aura as a party in the struggle for independence still permeates the consciousness but to a certain extent, it has lost its populist moorings among some segments of the Malay community.

It must rebuild itself as a party of popular participation. It must shape up, become leaner and a health freak, and have zero tolerance for corruption and inefficiency.

I know and am happy the Malays are returning to Umno but more must be done to win and retain their undivided loyalty.

For Umno specifically, it must end the electoral decline in some areas of the Malay heartland by replacing and taking strong action against those so-called leaders who have lost credibility with the voters and the Umno grassroots; reduce or eliminate the potential for party conflict; re-articulate an ideological framework that retains its past yet is dynamic enough to sustain itself and end the disillusionment of some Malays.

The country enjoys fair and free elections where the citizens can punish or reward the incumbents by voting for or against them. We have seen this in Kelantan, Terengganu, Sabah and once in Penang in 1969.

Some people say the Malaysian electorate is pliable. I disagree. In the Lunas by-election, there were 10,511 votes for Barisan Alternatif and 9,981 votes for Barisan Nasional.

BN won in the last general election. The rejection of BN here does not mean an acceptance of the Opposition.

The Lunas people themselves had their own agenda wherein they collectively signalled to the BN that neither the BN nor the Opposition made a difference.

We have won all subsequent by-elections. But come the next general election, I am sure Lunas will swing back to BN. And here lies the weakness of the Opposition: it is overwhelmed by its own victory that it simply refuses to see beyond the victory, a fault that BN can capitalise on.

Umno's and BN's strength is in helping the cause of women and the poor of all sexes and races.

I can see the combination of the two going forward and making Malaysian politics a very, very safe ground for the ruling parties.

I have always maintained in my writings that the rakyat's continued disillusionment with the political process poses several dangers. For one thing, disillusionment begets further disillusionment, and leadership, even governance for that matter, becomes more difficult if citizens do not give leaders the benefit of the doubt.

Citizens' disrespect for politics encourages a lesser breed to make careers in government.

Ideally, there should be quality participation - one that negotiates the available civic space in a responsible manner.

Democratic politics does not rest on contrived hysteria on the streets

or turning the public into cannon-fodder.

The public service has not been sufficiently responsive to the demands of either the elected government or citizens in developing and implementing its chosen policy.

Continued disappointment with particular government officials and branches of the government apparatus, the enforcement agencies - the police, the Attorney-General's Office, the Anti-Corruption Agency in the main - will ultimately metamorphose into disillusionment with the Government per se.

Much depends on the capacity of the BN-led Government to handle the changes and adapt to the expectations of the people.

I don't doubt its capacity but this must be strengthened by a strong sense of accountability - of the Cabinet, MPs, public servants, the corporate sector, the armed forces and of the vigilant rakyat.

There is so much a leader, even in the person of Dr Mahathir, can do. The Government is performing well but it can do better if we are also doing our bit.

We must not merely criticise it. Rather, we should help it by being more responsible and more civic and politically conscious.

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