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Acid test for MCA, Gerakan

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THE Malay saying rumah siap pahat berbunyi, is quite apt. Literally, it means "the chisel starts making noise after the house is completed". It is meant to chide those who make an issue of something which has already been agreed upon.

This seems to be the situation with the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English in Standard One in all primary schools next year.

The background is straightforward. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad proposed the idea and took it to the Umno general assembly in June.

It was accepted by the delegates amid protests by champions of Bahasa Melayu.

The proposal was then taken up to the Barisan Nasional where it was opposed by Chinese-based component parties which did not want it applied in national-type Chinese schools.

After some modifications for Chinese schools on Oct 31, at the BN supreme council meeting, component parties reached a consensus on the idea, in effect making it national policy.

On Monday, Chinese educationists under the Dong Jiao Zong banner held a Press conference to announce their stand against the policy. They said the formula was a disaster and would spell the end of vernacular schools.

Following that, the DAP and Pas came forward to express their support for Dong Jiao Zong.

The DAP has pledged to hold roadshows with the Dong Jiao Zong to rally the Chinese community against the policy.

There is also a threat involved: Moves are afoot to get all Chinese teachers to boycott the first day of school next year in protest against the policy.

The reaction of the Dong Jiao Zong and DAP's support for it is no new thing. In fact, the whole business is beginning to sound like an old record.

In October 1987, at the height of the controversy over the appointment of non-Mandarin educated teachers as administrators in Chinese primary schools, similar threats were made and carried out. Not only Dong Jiao Zong and DAP were involved. Even MCA and Gerakan joined in.

The problem threatened to spiral into full-scale racial conflict with Umno Youth holding a rally to send the message that it would not sit on the sidelines while attempts were being made to erode the rights and status of the Malays and violate national policies.

October 1987 also saw a nationwide swoop - Ops Lalang - on politicians and individuals under the Internal Security Act. After that, tensions subsided somewhat.

This time, Dong Jiao Zong and the DAP seem to be without the support they had in 1987. Pas, however, is with them.

With MCA, Gerakan and the Sabah/Sarawak-based Chinese parties - the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) and Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) - together with the Government on the new policy, Dong Jiao Zong is likely to be somewhat of a "loner".

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin pointed out that Dong Jiao Zong's protest should not be entertained as it is "the voice of the minority trying to impose its will on the majority".

Another Umno vice-president, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, argued the

point further:

"If all BN components, including the Chinese-based parties, agree to the proposal, obviously it is the voice of the majority.

"Isn't that the premise of democracy? All the political parties in the Government have reached a consensus on the matter and it is now time to implement it.

"If we are to listen to the voice of a minority group like the Dong Jiao Zong, we will never be able to govern the nation."

Malay leaders have used strong language such as "chauvinist" and "racist" to describe the educationists.

There have also been calls to use the Sedition Act and the ISA against them.

Again, unlike 1987, the MCA and Gerakan have strongly criticised Dong Jiao Zong. Leaders reacted promptly after the association made its views public.

Remarked an Umno man:

"The MCA and Gerakan leaders seem to be trying to make amends for their earlier opposition to the proposal. That, to me, reflects the BN spirit of give and take.

"They may have tried to play politics in the beginning, but once a consensus was reached, they are trying to prove they stand by it."

Another Umno leader was, however, less convinced.

"If the MCA and Gerakan had given support from the start, we would have isolated the educationists."

But better late than never.

In fact, the threat to use ISA came from MCA leader Datuk Chor Chee Heung who is Deputy Home Minister.

A political analyst closely linked to the MCA said:

"At this stage, all BN components must move as one. It also does not serve anybody's purpose if Umno Youth or other Malay movements start attacking the Chinese as a whole."

The truth is that all this passion will lead nowhere as long as MCA and Gerakan are with Umno and the other BN partners.

Unlike 1987, the situation this time is unlikely to damage the coalition much.

But for Umno it is a bitter pill to swallow. Always, these problems with the Chinese community seem to surface when it has suffered an erosion of Malay support.

Again, the situation is similar to 1987. In these circumstances, Malay opposition parties, especially Pas, offer "an alternative partnership" to the non-Malays, seemingly sympathetic to their demands.

And Dong Jiao Zong and other proopposition Chinese groups usually respond positively, prepared to support even Pas merely "to teach Umno and BN a lesson".

For DAP, this is an opportunity to regain its influence in the Chinese community after being punished for its alliance with Pas in the 1999 general election.

This is a true test of leadership for both MCA and Gerakan. If they stand solidly behind BN and don't yield to the temptation of behind-the-scenes chauvinistic politics, Dong Jiao Zong and DAP will be no match for the coalition.

The bottomline is that BN should leave the MCA and Gerakan to deal with the likes of Dong Jiao Zong. Both parties have made their stand on the issue crystal clear, and there can be no turning back for either. The Rubicon has been crossed.