

14/12/2002

The Barisan Nasional is greater than the sum of its parts

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AFTER the 1999 general election, a grandmother of eight from Sungai Siput was asked by her son as to which party she voted for.

"I voted for Barisan Nasional," came the quick reply.

The son was quite perplexed and asked: "But I thought you didn't like (Datuk Seri S.) Samy Vellu (BN MP for Sungai Siput)?"

She said she may not like Samy Vellu, but her heart was with BN. She said when she saw Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's poster next to Samy Vellu's, she just "swallowed her dislike for Samy Vellu and convinced herself that her vote was for Dr Mahathir".

Such voter reasoning prevails in our society.

In many ways, this kind of viewpoint has given BN, and formerly the Alliance, the edge over the Opposition since the first national election of 1959.

However, after the 1999 general election, Umno was deserted by a substantial number of Malay voters, leading to its poor showing in Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah.

It was also perceived that the MCA delivered the Chinese votes, ensuring the party's victory in Chinese-majority seats, as well as for Umno in mixed constituencies with more than 20 per cent Chinese voters.

There is no doubt that the MCA as well as the Gerakan, MIC and other component parties contributed to Umno's victory in mixed constituencies in the peninsula.

It is all in the spirit of the BN, in which each component sets aside party parochialism in the interest of the coalition.

However, after the 1999 general election, some MCA supporters bragged that they were now in a position to make demands in the interest of their community.

Some of the demands were not made directly by the MCA but by Chinese-based organisations.

These organisations also chose to oppose numerous Government policies affecting Chinese interests, while ignoring that the Malay and Indian interests were equally affected.

Issues like the Vision Schools, teaching of Mathematics and Science in English, demands by Suqiu (a Chinese organisation), quota for public universities' intake and the relocation of national-type Chinese school in Damansara, to name a few.

In many of these conflicts between the BN Government and the pressure groups, the MCA was seen as dragging its feet.

To its component partners, especially Umno, the MCA was "playing politics" or lacking the commitment to the BN cause.

The MCA, which had been a reliable partner to Umno in the BN prior to 1999, seemed to be playing to the gallery because Umno had weakened.

In the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English, for example, many Umno leaders felt that the MCA was trying to champion Chinese education even when Umno was facing brickbats from Malay supporters for the move.

In the case of Vision Schools and the SJKC Damansara issue, Umno felt that the MCA chose to shirk from its role to persuade Chinese voters to support the move, and the repercussion was the outcome of the Lunas by-election.

In that by-election, the BN, represented by the MIC, lost to Parti Keadilan Nasional and the general sentiment was that the Chinese voters

abandoned the coalition.

This has led to much bad blood between supporters of the two partners in BN.

To Umno supporters, MCA was a fair-weather friend, looking into its own interests when Umno was facing difficult times.

But an Umno leader pointed out that much as MCA may feel that it had delivered the Chinese votes for Umno and the BN to continue to rule the nation, Umno in turn had delivered Malay votes for the MCA.

An MCA Team B leader concurred, pointing out that almost all the top party leaders won in their constituencies because Malay voters, to be read as Umno supporters, gave them their votes.

MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik is the MP for Labis, a constituency with 42.52 per cent Malay voters.

His vice-president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting's Pontian seat has a majority of Malay voters who make up 53.12 per cent of the electorate.

The same goes for two other vice-presidents: Datuk Fong Chan Onn, whose seat in Selandar is 53.8 per cent Malay, and Datuk Chan Kong Choy, who won Selayang, where the electorate is 47.39 per cent Malay.

Another vice-president, Datuk Chua Jui Meng, has in his constituency of Bakri 45.18 per cent Malay voters.

Other top MCA leaders such as Wanita chief Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen of Raub and Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat of Ampang Jaya have Malay majority voters of 48.3 per cent and 54.99 per cent respectively.

"Much as the MCA leaders may feel that Umno is weak," said the Umno man, "they must not forget the support we have given them in the general election. Surely this is enough to make them realise that we are interdependent and in need of each other."

The debate now centres on how the MCA is going to act on the matter of its two Penang Assemblymen who abstained on an Opposition motion at the State Legislative Assembly on Nov 20, to defer the implementation of the Penang Outer Ring Road (PORR).

To most BN component parties, the MCA Assemblymen had breached the coalition's discipline and should be expelled.

Dr Ling seems to think that the BN has no right to interfere in the disciplining of MCA members, prompting BN chairman Dr Mahathir to remind BN component parties that the coalition had the power to accept or expel parties.

Penang BN chief Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon said it baffled him why the two Assemblymen, Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) and Tan Cheng Liang (Jawi), chose not to observe BN discipline when their constituencies were not affected.

He was also baffled why several other MCA Assemblymen had voted against the Opposition motion when their constituencies were affected by the PORR project.

All this makes the whole issue intriguing, while the MCA leadership seemed to drag its feet in dealing with the duo.

The Umno supreme council had unanimously decided that sacking is the only answer and this was supported by Gerakan.

Now the ball is in MCA's court. If it chooses not to expel the duo, it is going to be a slap in the face of the other BN components, including Umno, the senior partner.

Never in the history of BN has so much hinged on the fate of so few. MCA seems to be trying to make it a first.