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Examining offer and refusal

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PARTI Keadilan Nasional has sounded the gong for the next general election quite early, and in a cute manner.

"Vote in BA (Barisan Alternative, the self-styled Opposition front) and You Get Your Car Cheaper."

That was the heading of a Press statement issued on Friday by Keadilan deputy president Abdul Rahman Othman.

It was in response to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's contention that car prices would not drop even after the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta) became operative in the automotive sector in 2005.

Abdul Rahman decided to use the issue to urge Malaysians to vote for BA in the general election, due by 2004.

Such statements are obviously about political parties identifying what can touch the hearts of voters. Keadilan obviously feels the promise of cheaper cars can win it some votes.

But offering cheaper cars as an election promise, said an Umno member, showed Keadilan acknowledged that the nation had made good progress, so much so that the promise to fulfil basic needs is no longer a draw.

"If Keadilan considers cheaper cars as potential carrots to be dangled to voters, it means vehicles have become a necessity, reflecting the standard of living among Malaysians reaching the First World.

"That in itself is a recognition of the present Government's ability to take the nation to such heights."

The Umno man may want to ride on the success of his party, but the fact remains that voters do not necessarily reflect on how the nation has evolved but prefer to know what they can get from the participating political parties.

Such issues are, however, one-off and play a small part in determining the voting trend of the populace.

Previous general elections have shown that Malaysian voters are still moved by some major issues which have been around since the first election.

Security, well-being, race relations, religious harmony and education still make up the main course in the political diet.

While Keadilan was trying to cash in on the "cheaper car" promise, BN chairman Dr Mahathir invited Opposition parties to join the ruling coalition.

It was met with a rebuke and the sincerity of the offer was questioned.

Pas acting president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang described it as an attempt to remove Opposition parties and undermine democracy.

He was also quoted as saying that such offers should only be discussed after the next general election.

Pas spiritual leader Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat was more forthright with his response, saying he would be very angry if his colleagues even discussed the possibilities.

Nik Aziz admitted he was still bitter over Pas' experience with BN in the 1970s when the party was kicked out in 1978 in a humiliating fashion.

The reaction from Keadilan president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail was more focused - the priority of her party was to free detainees like her husband, former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Her deputy youth chief Saiffudin Nasution Ismail was more personal. In rejecting the offer, he described the invitation as a "political ploy by a

man who wants to redeem himself before retirement".

Saiffudin also used the now defunct Semangat 46 as an example, saying many former members of the party (which rejoined Umno in 1996 en bloc) found themselves displaced although a few leaders had gained recognition.

"Keadilan members will be treated the same way."

From Parti Rakyat Malaysia president Dr Syed Husin Ali came a more conciliatory remark. He suggested that Dr Mahathir start the process of forming a national unity government.

For this to be effected, he proposed that Dr Mahathir formally invite all parties, registered or otherwise, non-governmental organisations and respected individuals to discuss the matter together.

Syed Husin, however, negated his own proposal when he followed it up with a remark that it appeared that Dr Mahathir was actually worried about the impending PRM-Keadilan merger which he believed would strengthen the Opposition.

Finally, the DAP remains what it has always been, insisting on staying in the Opposition as a check on the BN Government.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi described the Opposition's rejection as narrow-minded. He said the parties were only concerned about their own struggle and not the nation's future.

"We in the BN have 14 parties and are already strong. However, we are willing to co-operate with the Opposition and invite them to join us as we want to ensure peace and harmony in the country."

There are several noteworthy aspects about both the offer and the rejection.

One is whether BN is truly so weak that it needs the Opposition to be with it.

Another point to ponder is whether democracy would have been imperilled if the invitation had been accepted.

Finally, one must ask whether the Opposition is truly strong enough to turn the tables on the BN and take the helm.

An analyst pointed out that if the 1999 general election was to be considered the benchmark, it was obvious that it presented the Opposition with the best opportunity to take control of the nation.

"However, what happened was that despite the confidence and wave of emotion the Opposition was riding on, they failed even to deny the BN its two-thirds majority in Parliament.

"Now, with the Opposition front in tatters, especially after the pullout of the DAP following its inability to reconcile itself with Pas' Islamic state pursuits, it is looking less and less as an alternative to BN."

A staunch BN supporter said what most "liberals" were hoping for in 1999 was to see the formation of a two-party system in which the BN faced the BA.

"If the BA had got its act together and each component had been able to accommodate each other, the Opposition front would have been an effective check on BN.

"However, after the 1999 polls it became obvious the Opposition marriage couldn't last, due to ideological polarisation.

"Imagine if Malaysians had voted the Opposition to power and only then the components decide to iron out their ideological differences! It would have been a potent recipe for disaster."

As for joining BN there are some hazy areas, especially the question of how democracy can work without the Opposition as a watchdog.

"If they accepted the invitation, then the concept of multi-party system would have been put into motion.

"The recent issue of Mathematics and Science to be taught in English serves as a good example of the effectiveness of the multi-party system in

checking each other within the ruling coalition," the BN supporter argued.

Ironically, with the exception of DAP and PRM, the rest of the Opposition parties have been in BN or a member of the coalition's component party.

In fact, of the 14 BN components, only three, Umno, MCA and MIC are original members of BN under the Alliance banner.

The remaining 11, be it their leaders or the party they lead, were all, at one time or another, outside the coalition.

That however, should not be the criterion for the Opposition parties to accept or reject the invitation.

Foremost should be their ability to get their houses in order, and to convince the citizenry that they have a clear concept of leadership if they get to lead the nation.

If they can't, the invitations to join the BN, collectively or individually, begin to make sense.

While the Opposition parties figure out how to participate in the next general election, Keadilan's promise of cheaper cars still sounds cute.

More cars mean more summonses. But fines for cheap cars will not be less than that for luxury vehicles.

This some BN leaders will vouch for.