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Probable homecoming of PBS a fine political reconciliation

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THE likely return of Parti Bersatu Sabah to the Barisan Nasional fold marks another significant step in the country's return to political "normalcy".

It comes long after its erstwhile national coalition partner, the Parti Semangat 46, had been integrated back into Umno, following that particular abortive grand plan for a viable political alternative to the BN.

PBS' tenure at the helm of the Sabah Government is memorable for two main reasons - its thinly-disguised "Sabah-first" platform and the open challenge to the authority of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad which was to prove its final undoing.

Still, if parties are to be rated based not only on performance in Government but also while out, PBS stands out as one which can still creditably hold its own even without the prop of being in Government.

This must owe much to the tenacity of its leader, Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, in the face of adversity.

PBS' impending "home-coming" will therefore represent a fine political tradition whereby opposing parties may fight dogged, "do-or-die" political battles but once passions have sufficiently subsided, do not lose sight of the possibilities of advancing greater interests through an honourable reconciliation - a sign of true statesmanship from both sides.

When all is said and done, PBS can well and truly claim to have perhaps changed the political course not only of Sabah but the entire nation, pro-actively and otherwise.

Like Berjaya before it, PBS was a single multi-racial governing party. In the course of its battle with Kuala Lumpur, it was instrumental in the Prime Minister's decision to introduce Umno into the State.

Some argued this was a retrogressive step, introducing the rigid race-based political system prevailing in the peninsula into a State with a commendable political tradition of single multi-racial ruling parties.

Yet it was Umno's entry into the Sabah political landscape which saw the party later relaxing its membership criteria to admit first non-Muslim Bumiputeras and later even Chinese members from Sabah.

With such a precedent set, it does not take too much political imagination to believe Sabah or Sarawak, for that matter, can perhaps influence the evolution of the national political culture, for the better, of course.

A stable political culture in Malaysia has always been predicated on Umno taking the lead role in pitching, and painstakingly maintaining, a large, almost all-inclusive political tent.

It follows that a better political culture will also require Umno leading the charge in bringing together the best strands of the various political elements in the country.

There is thing or two the country can learn from the political currents in Sabah and Sarawak.

The return of PBS into the BN will emphasise the continuing imperative of our national political struggle based on the quest for stability but is it also the harbinger of elevating our collective political struggle to greater heights?

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