

08/04/2004

Abdullah's winds of change

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TEAMWORK had a lot to do with the Barisan Nasional's big win in the general election but in the euphoria there are whiners who insist that they deserve better rewards, writes KALIMULLAH HASSAN.

ON Sunday, two weeks after his Barisan Nasional resoundingly won Malaysia's general election, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi met his full squad of Members of Parliament and state assemblymen and credited them for working as a team for victory.

He downplayed analysis attributing the BN victory to the "Pak Lah factor". They applauded him because, without a doubt, they worked hard for the BN's win not only in its traditional strongholds, but also in the supposedly unassailable "green belt" States of Terengganu, Kelantan and Kedah. They also reversed Pas' advances in Perlis, Perak, Selangor and Pahang.

In the euphoria of such a big win, Abdullah's message of "teamwork" may have eluded those present. It certainly did not get much play in the media.

Most people have short memories and none, maybe, more so than politicians. There are already some who, before the election, were preparing for their political demise, but now seem to think that they were solely responsible for their own bigger margins.

And there are some, from the BN, who now feel that they should be rewarded with senior government positions and were disappointed that they were not.

There are others, from the Opposition, who accept victory as the people's will and attribute defeat to a denial of the people's will. So Kelantan, which Pas won, was the people's democratic choice. Terengganu, which it lost, was "stolen" by unfair tactics. It is a no-win situation.

In the case of the BN, when a person is in a position to dish out the "largesse" - in this case positions of power - like the Prime Minister is, it is a similar catch-22 situation.

More than half the BN MPs were given positions in the administration, the majority of them, especially at deputy minister and parliamentary secretary level, young and being groomed for more senior positions within the next two to five years. Yet not all are happy.

There are the whiners who felt that they had not been recognised; that they had been sidelined; that they deserved better.

They disputed the appointment of certain ministers; they claimed that they are better than some who had been given positions. Today, after having won, they have so easily forgotten how they won.

Fine, there was the BN concept of powersharing, the promise of peace and prosperity. But did not the Opposition promise utopia in its manifesto? Reduced taxes, cheaper cars, utilities and all?

Fine, the BN has a proven track record. That is why it has won every election since independence. But not as spectacularly as this one. What causes "the winds of change" that result in the voter swing in favour of one party over another?

The "winds of change" saw Pas winning in Kelantan and Terengganu in 1999 and advancing in Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Pahang. But why did the wind reverse direction in 2004?

Wellregarded retired Penang MCA chief Tan Sri Dr Sak Cheng Lam, who posed this question, has no clear answers. But he concurs with DAP

chairman Lim Kit Siang that it was the Abdullah Ahmad Badawi tsunami. Pas' Kelantan State Assembly Speaker Datuk Wan Rahim says the same, only phrasing it as the "Pak Lah factor".

In 1969, after the Alliance, the BN's predecessor, experienced its worst electoral performance culminating in the May 13 racial riots, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein ushered in the winds of change by having a national reconciliation Government which saw the BN roar into power.

In 1982, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad captured the imagination of Malaysians with his blunt, forward style and the BN won impressively.

In 2004, after the devastating 1999 split in the Malay ground, Abdullah, whether he acknowledges it or not, was the catalyst for the winds to blow in the BN's favour, friend or foe say.

Abdullah is right in saying that it was the BN's commitment, team spirit and cooperation that gave the coalition victory. But the consensus is that had he not been able to provide the leadership, and had he not captured the people's imagination and earned their trust, the team would not have worked as well and victory would not have been as massive.

It was his team of committed and idealistic aides, young and old, and Umno and BN colleagues who supported and devised his ideas and his nominal clean campaign theme, which worked with one idealistic objective - a better future for Malaysia.

It was Abdullah's coalition colleagues, who, believing in him, fought tooth and nail to wrest back inch-by-inch Opposition territory.

Even then, in the early pre-election days and during the run-up, there were the malcontents, the recalcitrant and the egoistic, power-driven individuals who sullied the campaign. But they were few and manageable.

Today again, there are the discontented and frustrated few that are pointing fingers at the same Abdullah team that managed the election so well. These disgruntled BN politicians and their throng of shepherded supporters are agitating through the vintage poison-pen letters, the Short Messaging Service (SMS) and the traditional coffee house scandal-mongering.

The Cabinet line-up that Abdullah announced is the source of their vitriol. The disappointment among the more neutral intelligentsia, analysts and media who expected sweeping changes, has provided the frustrated politicians and supporters the feed to agitate the ground.

For those who expected revolutionary changes, the responses are fairly similar.

"Not much change."

"Not good enough."

"Same old, some old."

Go further. Ask what would satisfy their expectation of sweeping changes. And inevitably, the answer boils down to the removal of three or four Cabinet personalities perceived to be tainted.

Therefore, if these three or four personalities were excluded, would it have been a good Cabinet? The consensus is "yes".

Three or four out of a 33-member Cabinet and yet it is not good enough for the critics. But they cannot be blamed because their expectations were different.

It could not have been an easy choice for Abdullah. He came up with the line-up after considering the reality of component party politics, racial balance, gender, distribution of power between the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak.

Abdullah's persona and his character are the main reasons why voters strongly backed the BN in the election. And this is probably the very reason why he included a few of those personalities in his Cabinet.

It is not Abdullah's style to condemn a person unless it can be proven

that the person is guilty of wrongdoing or there are reasonable grounds to doubt that person's integrity. Perception or accusation, to him, is not a good enough reason.

Some may say politics is a game of perception and politicians do not fall in the category of innocent until proven guilty.

But for Abdullah, his friends say, a person will not be judged just based on accusations made against him. In the murky world of politics, allegations and finger-pointing are a norm. If Abdullah were to take action based on unproven charges, he would not have many people to choose from, even if he were to source them from opposition politicians.

Abdullah should know. During the Umno battles of 1987, 1990 and 1993, he was accused of many things. When he first became Deputy Prime Minister, a picture was posted on the Internet, trying to show that he condoned drinking liquor, an attempt to blemish his Islamic image.

Even in the recent election, besides the allegations of abuse of power and cruelty chucked at him by the opposition Keadilan party, Pas accused him of not being a filial son, being unIslamic and "pretending" to be religious because he led prayers.

Lest people forget, in the months pre-ceding his succession to Prime Minister, many critics of the Cabinet line-up also said Abdullah could not hold the BN and Umno together because he was seen as weak, or too nice and too soft. Those who said he was not good enough to be Prime Minister then were among those who, four months later, said he was Malaysia's best chance for the future.

No-win situation again.

In focusing on the few disliked personalities in the Cabinet, people overlook the fact that more than half the deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries are new, have good image, and are being groomed for the leadership of the future.

The stalled regeneration process is taking place with an earnestness and vigour not seen since Dr Mahathir brought in many young and fresh faces in 1982.

Don't people like Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili, Datuk Khaled Nordin, Datuk Husni Hanadzlah, Negri Sembilan's Datuk Mohamed Hassan, Datuk Dr Mashitah Ibrahim, Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, Datuk Shafie Apdal, Datuk Dr Awang Adek Hussin, Ahmad Shabbery Chik or Terengganu's Datuk Idris Jusoh reflect a new hope for Malaysia?

Don't the experienced and tested ones like Datuk Dr Shafie Mohd Salleh, Datuk Mustapha Mohamed, Datuk Dr Fong Chan On, Datuk Seri Dr Lim Kheng Yaik and many of the others count at all?

Since being sworn in as Prime Minister on March 23, Abdullah has repeatedly stated his conditions and criteria which he expects his colleagues to abide by - honesty, integrity, hard work, service to constituents and being free from corrupt practices.

The BN MPs and assemblymen are his choice, by and large. Their slate, as far as Abdullah is concerned, is not desecrated but if they violate his code of ethics, he will come down hard on them. He has promised Malaysians that he will not protect them and leave them to the devices of the law should they stray.

They have been warned and for the Prime Minister, it is not only his reputation but also that of his administration that is at stake. Short memories or not, people have given him their trust and five years down the road, when the BN goes canvassing for votes, people will remember these promises.

Much as those disappointed are critical, no one can be more aware of the consequences of violating the people's trust than Abdullah himself. He has taken an oath and if his 26 years of spotless public service in politics

is a benchmark, he has always kept his word. If he does not, he knows that the people will remember in 2009.

As for the frustrated politicians who are angry they did not get the positions they desired, they should remember that teamwork had led to their victory. Much as their sense of self-importance tells them that they won because they are the best, they should take a lesson from Abdullah's message to the MPs and assemblymen that "Pak Lah alone could not win the election".

If they can learn a little humility, then they will also realise that comeback kids are not a rarity in Malaysian politics. If they are really that good, their day will come.