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Pragmatism key to PBS rehabilitation

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IT is somewhat ironical that Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) is finally fully rehabilitated in the Barisan Nasional (BN) fold after the retirement of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, although credit still has to go to him for accepting PBS back while he was still Prime Minister and BN Chairman.

PBS' full participation in government at both the Federal and State levels following the general election is a reminder that the BN as a political force in Malaysia is a winner without peer.

PBS left Dr Mahathir in the lurch at probably the lowest point in his long political career - on the eve of a general election when Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah split from Umno after nearly unseating the then Prime Minister as Umno President.

Dr Mahathir then typically met fire with fire, deciding almost on the spot on Umno's immediate entry into Sabah politics. He gambled hugely then and the clear dividends of that gamble finally become apparent only now, under his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

If ever a lesson is needed against appeasing your political enemy, Umno's entry into Sabah must be a classic. Now PBS has to be content with playing second-fiddle to Umno on a political turf which the former appeared unassailable before.

The decades of political in-fighting have clearly taken its toll on Sabah. Thoughtful Sabah folk invariably look across the border to Sarawak with an envious eye on the latter's remarkable physical transformation under stable BN rule.

Now Sabah has a real chance to play catch-up, with Umno well-entrenched and PBS deciding that pragmatism is the better part of valour.

With PBS actively inside the BN Government, and former Chief Minister Datuk Seri Pairin Kitingan as Deputy Chief Minister and one of his key party-mates, Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili, as a Federal Minister, the two most significant political forces in Sabah today both have almost equally vital stakes in ensuring that the current BN administrations at State and Federal levels deliver to the people.

Ideological differences aside, particularly the academic issue of Sabah's rightful place within the Malaysian Federation, will have to be set aside in favour of the traditional bread-and-butter issues over which Malaysian elections are won or lost.

The ultimate saving grace of the BN coalition is its essential pragmatism, wherein mortal political enemies can fight tooth-and-nail once they have a falling-out but eventually see merit in reconciling for the greater good of the people.

Such acts of statesmanship can only come about if winners and losers alike win and lose honourably.

As the saying goes, nothing succeeds like success and the BN brand seems to be the only one that can spell success in Malaysia.

It seems natural that like-minded pragmatic political parties eventually decide they have more in common within the BN. Political forces which truly believe they want to make a difference on the Malaysian political landscape will ultimately have to make their peace and decide they can only make that difference by being inside rather than outside the BN.

Democracy purists may carp over such a state of affairs but result-oriented Malaysians cannot complain and they prove through election after election that they form the electoral majority in this country.

