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Kit Siang: We will be responsible, responsive

By Balan Moses

DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang is raring to return to his role as Opposition Leader of the Dewan Rakyat, which he relinquished after an unexpected defeat in the 1999 elections. Yet, the five-year hiatus may have mellowed the colourful lawyer-politician who feels there is room for a working relationship in the august House with the Government.

He explains his reasons, and conditions, for such co-operation in an interview with BALAN MOSES who first met the firebrand 25 years ago.

Q: The DAP did better than expected in the general election. What does this mean in terms of DAP's role now?

A: In terms of results, it's not a very great improvement. But, of course, in the context of the devastating defeat of Pas in losing Terengganu and (the possibility) that they may lose Kelantan anytime and (the fact that they had) 27 MPs struck down to seven, which was its position in 1995, and Keadilan going through with one, in that context, of course, the ability of the DAP to hold its numbers and gain two extra seats is significant.

We suffered a major blow in Kota Melaka, a 35-year stronghold that we lost. As a result, we have been put in a position of great responsibility in holding the fort for democracy, good governance and a voice of the people in Parliament.

The Opposition has never been weaker. BN not only got two-thirds, they got an unprecedented nine-tenths for the first time since independence.

Even (Tun Dr) Mahathir never had it. So this I will say is a time bomb for democracy. In a sense, if things go wrong, they can go wrong very quickly.

The Barisan Nasional has more than 90 per cent of the seats and the DAP has only five per cent of 219 seats. To take on 200-odd BN MPs, including ministers, is a tall order. We have to try to make up for the lack of numbers with quality of performance and commitment.

We see ourselves with a very great responsibility and that's why we are asking our MPs to be very professional and adopt a responsible approach. We have allocated parliamentary portfolios.

Q: You say you want your MPs to be professional. How are they going about it?

A: In the past, we allocated portfolios but fell flat on our faces. There wasn't much specialisation and division of responsibility, and we had very few MPs. But this time we should do it because there is greater expectation.

Everyone will have to double or triple up. Not all are full-timers so nobody is going to become an expert in their fields. They have to become practitioners of life-long education, they should read and study.

We expect them to come up with position papers not only for party consumption, but also for the public. To spark off discussion. I hope there will be a more dynamic five years of parliamentary representation.

Q: Will this differ substantially from the past?

A: There will be some qualitative and quantitative changes. We have undoubtedly benefited from the 30 years that I was the leader of the Opposition as well as the five-year absence.

Q: In the past, you had to contend with Dr Mahathir who had a different style of leadership from Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Will this see a difference in approach in Parliament?

A: I don't think there will be any material change. We will continue to articulate, reflect and represent the views of the people. There is need for a fuller, more balanced and deeper representation in Parliament.

With regard to the personality of the PM, we have to see how Abdullah conducts himself in Parliament because that's where the interaction will be.

We have to see whether he is prepared to, as he said in Parliament on Nov 3 last year, fully respect the doctrine of separation of powers.

Q: Do you welcome his new accommodative approach?

A: I welcome the sentiments contained in his statements. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. For instance, the DAP was never informed or consulted when the National Integrity Plan was launched. The Opposition was never consulted on the reappointment of Suhakam or the appointment of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on the Police Force. I think all this must be fully reflected.

Q: Are you suggesting that any major government move, programme or plan affecting Malaysians should involve consultations with the Opposition?

A: The Opposition must be fully consulted and be involved. The Opposition must be respected for their representation of the people and there should be a new approach to stop viewing the Opposition as anti-national, negative, destructive, divisive.

Abdullah is talking about first world infrastructure and third world mentality. This is one area in which he must begin. We must have a First World Parliament rather than a First World Parliament building.

Q: What have you learnt about the Malaysian voter from the recent election?

A: The last elections were driven by a number of major considerations. One is the feel good factor since Abdullah took over and the promise of change.

That there will be more consultative, open, more people-oriented, and a meaningful change in terms of governance. That it will be clean, incorruptible, efficient, transparent and people-oriented.

Secondly, it reflects people's fear and rejection of Pas' Islamic state as completely unacceptable and unfeasible for a modern plural Malaysia.

The third important message, in the DAP's Kinta Valley victory in particular, is that Malaysia must remain committed to the 46-year social contract as a secular democracy with Islam as the official religion but not as an Islamic state - be it a Pas or an Umno Islamic state.

That includes Islam Hadhari which Abdullah advocates. Any proposal which seems to move away from this social contract should be examined with great care, circumspection and consultation.

Q: Will you raise the issue of Islam Hadhari in Parliament?

A: The whole question of political Islam is a fundamental issue in Malaysian nation-building and it must be addressed in a rational manner. It must be discussed.

The election results are generally regarded as the rejection of Pas' Islamic state but what is not read is that it is also a verdict against Umno's Islamic state.

But there are those who think this issue has rested there. There is complacency and it will be a mistake as political Islam will be an increasingly important issue which must be addressed by and concerns all.

If you do not address this in Parliament, then where are you going to address it? People are concerned about the future of the country in the next 10, 20 and 30 years.

We want to make Malaysians understand, Muslims and non-Muslims, that when we talk about secular democracy we are not taking about being anti-Islam or anti-religion.

Secular in some quarters has become a dirty word when it is interpreted as anti-Islam or anti-religion. There is a need to restore the original meaning of secular in the Malaysian context. In 1982, Tun Hussein Onn openly declared Malaysia a secular nation and not an Islamic state.

Surely, they were not saying that Malaysia was anti-Islam, but a state of government where the best values of all religions are respected.

Q: So the question of political Islam is in your view one of the the major issues to be addressed by all?

A: You must reach a national consensus. How should good values and teachings of Islam become a major influence in nation-building - that must be recognised.

At the same time, the values and teachings of all other religions must be given recognition. So I would like to see Malaysian children grow up not only multilingual but knowledge-able about all religions.

They must understand each other's religion and good values, because only then can there be a basis for durable and tolerant national unity and integration. It must begin in schools, it should be in the syllabus to help build multi-religious understanding, tolerance and goodwill.

Q: What are the other major issues that everyone should be interested in over the next four to five years?

A: Corruption. Some commendable moves in this direction, including the launching of the national integrity plan, have been made. But launching the plan itself does not take the campaign very far unless there is political will.

Whether we can restore democracy, the rule of law, free Press, have a real fight against corruption, build a nation of really united Malaysians where all respect each other's ethnic, religious, cultural differences, good quality education so Malaysians can compete with the rest of the world.

Q: What will your priorities be in Parliament?

A: Live telecast of parliamentary proceedings for greater accountability. We also want the Public Accounts Committee to be chaired by an Opposition MP as is the practice in most First World countries. Also, research facilities for MPs from both sides. In most parts of the world, each MP has two to three research assistants. I will also propose a motion of no-confidence against the Election Commission over the running of the elections.

Q: Do you see a united Opposition front in Parliament?

A: There will not be one because on the question of an Islamic state, for instance, there is no ground for understanding. On common issues, there can be a united and cordial relationship.

We hope DAP MPs can work together with Pas and Keadilan MPs, but we also hope to work together with the Barisan Nasional MPs in the interest of Parliament, in terms of reforms.

All MPs, including those from BN, should see things in the larger national interest. They should sometimes take positions as MPs and not just submit to the party whip.

Q: Does this work both ways?

A: Yes.

Q: If the Government does come up with a workable proposition, is the DAP then prepared to support them?

A: Definitely, there is no doubt about that. Anything good which comes from the Government, the DAP will support and we hope the BN MPs will do likewise.

Q: Has politics changed since you entered the DAP as a founder-member in 1966?

A: It is a party for all races. It is not a Chinese party. I concede

that in the last 25 years it has been painted as an anti-Malay party largely because of Umno propaganda. In 1990, the DAP worked with Semangat 46, although finally Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah went back to Umno. Lim Guan Eng sacrificed his political future for a 14-year-old Malay girl.

Anybody who is prepared to stand up for the rights of a Malaysian of another race is an example of multi-racialism. The DAP's stand on Anwar Ibrahim, its role in forming the Barisan Alternative, working with Pas and Keadilan in the 1999 election although that cost the DAP (votes), on the question of an Islamic State, shows that DAP is a Malaysian party.

We cannot afford to be anti-Malay or against any religion. This will be the greatest challenge for the DAP in the next five years.

Q: What are your plans to ensure the next rung of leadership to take over from both of you?

A: It is not for me to make succession plans, but the party. I am sure when the time comes, there will be leaders who can take over.

Q: Did you introduce any of these leaders in the past election? Can you identify some of them?

A: No. As far as the past election, in the last five years I have not played the leading role in the party because I was the chairman and in the party the chief executive officer is the secretary-general.

Q: Have you given yourself a time-frame as the party chairman?

A: No. As long as I feel I am useful and can contribute to the party and nation I will continue to do so.

Q: What is the situation with the secretary-general's post?

A: Kula (Ipoh Barat MP Kulasegaran) is the acting secretary-general.

Q: How long will he hold it?

A: Until the congress in September and then, of course, it is up to the wisdom of the members.

Q: Do you find yourself slowing down after more than three decades in politics?

A: With increasing age, anybody would find himself slowing down. It is a very subjective matter anyway.

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