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Strength in numbers

By A Kadir Jasin

POLITICS is a little bit like marriage. Election is its big, noisy wedding reception. The victory is the honeymoon.

The wedding lasts a day or two at the most. The honeymoon may extend for a few weeks. When the guests are gone, the gifts opened, family members bade farewell and the honeymoon ended, reality sets in. There are promises to be met, pledges to be fulfilled and responsibilities to be carried out.

Such was the case with our recent general election. After the excitement of the campaigning, voting and counting of votes, and formation of the State and Federal Governments, the reality has started to sink in.

Thus, in less than two weeks after the Barisan Nasional (BN)'s thumping victory on March 21, the mainstream media - which had presented us with an orgy of song and dance in its aftermath - went back to reporting reality.

In place of praise for the victors and the promises they had made were the bread-and-butter stories of 'pelajar mati dibelasah' (student beaten to death), 'stop school thugs', 'hotline on school bullies' and 'be careful in Thailand'.

If they are not already, the voters, in particular, and the people, in general, will soon be asking: What's in it for us?

Will more ministries, ministers and civil servants improve our lot, or, as the residents in a certain place in Penang discovered, will the water from the taps in their houses be as murky as ever?

So much hope and expectation had been created during the election campaign, and thanks to the widespread coverage given to the BN by the mainstream media, the majority of the voters believed that a change for the better was a foregone conclusion. So, they voted for the BN en masse.

It is not surprising that so much hope has been pinned on the new enlarged Cabinet and the State Executive Councils in the BN-controlled states. Even in Kelantan, where the BN has to contend with being a strong opposition, the people are hoping for nothing less than the spectacular.

Unfortunately, as has been proven time and again, size and numbers do not necessarily translate into greater efficiency and productivity. This is the reality that all parties in the political contract must accept.

Before the people can start enjoying the benefits of a big government, they must first accept the fact that more taxpayers' money will now be spent on the salaries and allowances of more ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretaries and their retinue of civil service helpers.

There are today 28 ministries and 33 ministers as opposed to 25 and 29 respectively when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad exited last October. There are today 38 deputy ministers and 22 parliamentary secretaries against 29 and 16 respectively previously. As such, all parties must work very hard to make sure that the larger number of ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentary secretaries, state executive councillors and senior civil servants translates into greater efficiency and productivity, failing which everybody will suffer.

Fortunately, marriage is not subject to elections, as otherwise there will be many broken promises, strained relationships and divorce cases.

A JUGGLING ACT

HOW the people judge the Cabinet is less likely to be influenced by their like and dislike of the appointees rather than their confidence in what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has been promising since he took over last November.

If they are to base their verdict on their personal feelings, then some of the appointees may not enjoy their fullest support either because they have been around for far too long or because they are not seen as being in tandem with the prevailing political mantra.

By and large, they will be judging the Cabinet on Abdullah's promise of transparency and accountability, and, most of all, his unequivocal pledge to rid the government and the bureaucracy of corruption and abuse of power. Thus, it is only to be expected that the buzz is not just about the size of the Cabinet but as much about whether the people appointed to it - whether they are new faces or incumbents - will meet Abdullah's own stand and stance on corruption.

Having acted on a Cabinet Minister (Tan Sri Kasitah Gaddam) and a high-profile corporate figure (Tan Sri Eric Chia) for alleged corruption, the public's expectations have risen.

While these high-profile cases serve to highlight Abdullah's resolve to confront corruption head-on and make the people feel good, it is the low-level corruption and abuse of power at the police stations, district and land offices, immigration counters, the Customs check-points and the Road Transport Department motor vehicle inspection centres that are exacting the price on the ordinary people.

Yet, as a seasoned politician and a former civil servant - one who has gone through the best and the worst that politics has to offer - Abdullah would be the first to acknowledge that fighting corruption carries as much risk as the promise of rewards.

It is a difficult juggling act because in politics accommodation is the key to survival. Thus, while nobody can deny that he has been handed a solid mandate, Abdullah still has to face his party, Umno, in order to complete his accession.

Additionally, he has also to accommodate other BN component parties as they too contributed strongly to his victory. Apart from the main BN, he has also to accommodate the Sabah and Sarawak factions of the coalition.

These two eastern states will exert even stronger influence on national politics, having delivered a resounding victory for the BN.

The stability of Sarawak hinges on the unity of the state BN, an entity that is distinct from the national BN in that it is made exclusively of state-based parties.

The stability of Sarawak BN, in turn, rests with the timing and nature of the transfer of power from its long-serving Chairman and Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud to his chosen successor. Taib recently told the Press that he would go at a time of his choosing.

Sabah, despite delivering a near-perfect score, remains politically fluid with the centre of gravity shifting among the Muslim Bumiputera, the non-Muslim Bumiputera and the non-Bumiputera.

Unless judiciously handled and wisely managed, the discontinuation of the rotation of the Chief Minister's post could rekindle the rivalry among the three factions.

Thus, while the resounding mandate should rightly guarantee Abdullah's confirmation as Umno president at this year's party election, the Prime Minister still has to make a deal or two with party bosses, in particular, the state liaison chiefs, in order to ensure no last minute hiccups.

This gives credibility to coffee-shop talk that the Cabinet reflects the unfinished business in Umno and that once the party election is over, there could be further changes to the line-up. The number of ministers could fall and new faces could be appointed.

According to this theory, Abdullah has deliberately created a pool of six ministers in the Prime Minister's Department. A few of them are seen as suitable for redeployment and upgrading at some later stage. But the

Prime Minister's more immediate task is to get the new ministries up and running while ensuring that there is no serious overlapping of authority and responsibilities.

#### TOWARDS GREATER TRANSPARENCY

APART from ensuring that bureaucracy does not stand in the way of efficiency and productivity, the division of duties should reflect, in no uncertain terms, the seriousness of the Government to provide the people with the best while upholding the principles of transparency and accountability.

Thus, regardless of whether a minister is responsible for such critical services as health and education or just taking care of Parliament, the same stringent rules must apply.

It was reported that Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Mohd Nazri Aziz would be responsible for Parliament. That a minister is needed to take charge of Parliament full-time could only be construed as the Government wanting Parliament to be more transparent and relevant to the day-to-day lives of the ordinary people.

Admittedly, the level of discussion and quality of debate in both the Dewan Rakyat and Dewan Negara is still wanting. With the strength of the opposition reduced, the role of Parliament as a place for crystallising ideas and debating issues could degenerate if Government members are resigned to becoming 'yes men'.

Maybe Nazri has been made responsible for Parliament because he is not opposed to being criticised and has the penchant for plunging himself into controversies.

The general expectation is that the appointment is not of the personal-to-holder type but one that is made with the welfare of Parliament and the people in mind.

The same applies to the declaration of assets. This is nothing new but the seriousness and credibility of the exercise have often been a bone of contention. Thus, a more serious face must be given to it.

While it is true that the declaration is statutory, ie, made under oath, the absence of regular and systematic samplings has led to its accuracy being questioned. It would be tremendously useful to subject all or a sampling of the declaration to a litmus test by such agencies as the Anti-Corruption Agency and the Inland Revenue Department. Or for extreme measures, make them publicly known via Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies.

It is not an unknown fact that some elected representatives on both the Government and opposition benches are wealthy. Among the new crop of representatives are those who are fabulously rich as they are successful businessmen and professionals.

Whereas we cannot fault them for their wealth, the knowledge of the real value of their assets is helpful in ensuring that the incidence of money politics does not worsen with their presence.

As for those who have worked against the interest of the party, only the most severe action should be contemplated. It happened not only in Kelantan, as was widely claimed, but in other states as well.

There were instances of the BN doing well in a parliamentary seat but badly in the state seats within it and vice-versa. Take Kota Baru in Kelantan for instance. The BN won the parliamentary seat but lost all three state seats.

While the victorious BN parliamentary candidate Datuk Zaid Ibrahim polled 23,831 votes, his three state running mates received a combined 20,755 votes.

In the Pendang parliamentary seat in Kedah, its two BN state candidates polled a total of 24,559 votes but its parliamentary candidate polled

24,380 votes, losing to his Pas rival by a mere 50 votes.

Days into the campaigning, Deputy Prime Minister and Umno Vice President Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak privately acknowledged that there were signs of sabotage by some Umno divisional leaders. Najib should know better. He was almost defeated in the 1999 general election. He won by a mere 241 votes. This time around, he romped home with a whopping 22,922-vote margin.

#### PETITIONS GALORE

ANOTHER aspect of the election that would certainly not escape the attention of the BN and opposition parties alike is election petitions.

It is understood that at the point of writing, the March 21 general election results would be gazetted on April 12, paving the way for dissatisfied parties to file their petitions.

That petitions would be filed is a foregone conclusion. In fact, based on the prevalence of police reports lodged against the Election Commission (EC) on and after the March 21 voting, the country may see the most number of such complaints being made for a single general election.

That the commission performed poorly has been a source of dissatisfaction for both the BN and opposition parties.

In the extreme, the DAP and Parti Keadilan Nasional had as early as March 25 called for a fresh election, claiming that the commission had failed to conduct a fair and free election.

Pas had asked its members to collect evidence of irregularities, while Gerakan President Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik wanted the commission to accept responsibility for the hitches and foul-ups.

The worst-case scenario? A fresh election may be ordered. However, the possibility of this happening is remote as voting and counting went on smoothly, to the satisfaction of all parties, in the majority of areas.

But even Umno insiders have acknowledged that there might be a case for a fresh election in the whole or some parts of Selangor where the ineptitude of the commission was most obvious, anything from missing names to voters being given the run-around to the extension of voting hours in some areas.

So, it appears that some Wakil Rakyat have to keep their fingers tightly crossed and pray very hard. The outcome of the petitions notwithstanding, the EC has to be completely overhauled - this we do not have to wait for a court to decide.

#### PENANG'S PUBLIC TRANSPORT WOES

FOR reasons of nostalgia and simplicity, this segment of the column will be written in the style of The Daily News, which should be familiar to those who attended the Special Malay Class (SMC). It goes something like this:

Last week I went to Penang. I went to Penang by aeroplane. A state government motor car took me from the airport to the city. The new terminal at the Penang Airport is very beautiful. But the road to Georgetown was very congested.

Many people in Penang drove motor cars and rode motor cycles. I saw many motor cars and motor cycles. I saw many people waiting at bus-stands. I did not see many buses.

I saw several mini buses. They were painted many colours. They were old and not very clean. I did not see any city hall buses. Also, I did not see the yellow buses. But I saw some buses belonging to the Hin Bus Company.

When I was working in Penang in 1969, there were many buses there. In those days, public transport was very good in Penang. Buses went everywhere. The fares were also cheap.

I met some people at a bus-stand in Penang Road. They told me they had been waiting for buses for more than an hour. They told me that they could

not afford to take taxis. Taxi fares were very expensive.

Penang has many pensioners. Pensioners cannot afford to own a car or ride a taxi. I was very sad to see old people waiting a long time for buses. I think Penang should have better public transport. Public transport is important for Penang. Penang is an island. It cannot have too many roads. Public transport can ease traffic jams.

I sometimes sense that much of what Penang has and is enjoying today was created or planned during Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu's tenure.

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