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A strong Umno for stability

By Zambry Abdul Kadir

THE political near-hegemony of Barisan Nasional and Umno has had a moderating effect on Malaysian politics. Barisan Nasional's dominance provides a happy equilibrium. The unqualified success of BN and Umno has stifled the more excitable characters in Malaysian politics.

A weakened Umno will therefore upset the delicate balance. The overwhelming clout of Umno enforces discipline in the ranks. The now subdued elements in communal-based parties will be energised at the first signs of the diminishing influence of Umno.

The expanding middle class is very much part of the mainstream politics. They now wish, naturally, to have a greater say in the affairs of the Government. They need to be assuaged that the Government will not foist things on them; that they be empowered to make decisions for themselves.

I, for one, very much like to know the views of Pas leaders on such issues as meritocracy and affirmative action. Organised debates will render the Pas political ceramah irrelevant. The middle class yearns for such a free flow of discussion.

All the same, this has been a Government that had not succumbed to such temptation as playing to the gallery. It has been vindicated. It has pushed through difficult decisions. Would a national debate produce the Penang bridge, the North-South Expressway, the KLCC, Formula 1 or KLIA?

The Government, I think, is not about to mother those who have made it. It looks at the diverse social spectrums and believes it must bring the others on board fast for a level playing field. Once everyone is safely on board, vestiges of a post-Independence paternalistic Government will trail off. We may even have a small Government. Well, that is something else, for a different time.

The scheduled transition in October does not make the guessing game any easier. It has spiced up things. Perhaps Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will pass the baton to his deputy in October and give Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi time to consolidate, choose his team, and lead the party into the 11th general election, which can be held anytime next year.

In fact, if the parliamentary term lapses on its own - the first parliamentary session was held a few weeks after the Nov 29, 1999 general election - a 2005 election is plausible. The Election Commission has 60 days from the time the five-year term ends to call for one.

Even so, the election may not be held until the Election Commission completes its redelineation exercise. Upon the approval of Parliament, Umno and other parties would call for the setting up of new divisions along the new parliamentary boundaries.

In line with the Registrar of Society Acts, the party will be restructured under the protem status. This will cause massive restructuring of the divisional office bearers.

In this context, the year 2003 is unlikely to introduce the term "political upheaval" into the Malaysian political dictionary. Umno has proven its wisdom in producing capable leaders for the country. Thus it may not be shocking to find along the way that the upper echelon is adjusted and strengthened.

Chinese politics will continue to veer away from communal stereotypes. The Chinese community has a big middle class. They are not preoccupied with such things as "the character" of Chinese schools and Chinese

education.

The rivalry between MCA and DAP will increasingly be shaped not by communal sentiments, but by pragmatism. The days of the Chinese community clamouring for Chinese conglomerates to rival Pernas are over.

This is a nation that unfailingly provides hope and opportunity. A nation that provides the environment that enables everyone to fulfil his or her true potential.

DAP will suffer the most from the expanding Chinese middle class. Kepong has always been a safe DAP seat. Well, no more. The Kuala Lumpur suburbs feature increasingly gated communities; parents are obsessed with getting their children to speak English well. They want to give their children a head start, to steal a march on the rest.

DAP's support base will be confined to pockets of economically depressed areas.

The Team A-Team B rivalry within MCA will be closely watched. We hope they will be locked in an intellectual battle to come up with new thinking on the development of the nation. The decision by Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik to relinquish his ministerial post would not weaken MCA representation in the BN. Should Ling make his exit, the existing MCA quota in the Government will be maintained. Will it intensify factionalism? Rivalries among the Chinese-based parties in matters of garnering young Chinese support will continue. Young Chinese are savvy and IT-literate. Chinese political parties will be sorely mistaken if they do not worry about the young being gripped by apathy, cynicism and a disinterest in politics.

I mentioned the need for Pas to reinvent. Pas is embroiled in an ideological battle. One group wants the party to be politically sensible and start targeting urban areas; others prefer Pas to defend its rural constituency. Before the 1999 election, Pas exerted a universal Islamic character, and in 1999 it moved to the middle ground, downplaying its Islamic stance for the sake of a united Opposition.

Pas will again change tack. With a new leader, Pas' Islamist image will be accentuated. Pas will pounce on any misgivings arising from the issue of SAR (Sekolah Agama Rakyat) religious schools and the English policy, galvanise support among the disenchanting Muslims.

I expect Pas to postpone its Islamic state ambitions due to a number of reasons.

Firstly, the upcoming elections and the global war on terror have forced Pas to portray a moderate image. Secondly, AK party, which now rules Turkey is not an advocate of the Islamic state. Thirdly, a looming leadership battle will hurt the party.

The biggest question is the question of Pas' new lineup. The top two posts have never been contested. Behind-the-scenes jostling is intense for the No 2 post to be vacated by Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang who is to be named president. There is no obvious No 2. Mustafa Ali is savvy by Pas standards and has served at the Federal level when Pas was part of the BN.

Fourthly, the deepening crisis between the religious orthodoxy and the young professionals will boil over as they disagree on methods and approaches with regards to the Islamic state issue and the stance on Malay unity.

The fifth crisis concerns Pas' position on the question of fielding women as election candidates. The leadership has to overcome the resistance of the ulama headed by Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat.

Keadilan is entirely dependent on the Anwar issue. Its disintegration may benefit Umno. The merged Keadilan-PRM party is no alternative party to Umno. Hundreds of Keadilan members will return to Umno.

As far as Islamic policies are concerned, the BN Government will maintain its existing structure without falling into a restrictively

conservative interpretation of Islam. Malaysia will continue to provide an exemplary model for the modern state without sacrificing the adherence to the fundamental teachings of Islam.

In addition, efforts will be redoubled to correct misinterpretation of Islam by certain religious functionaries and political followings. It is expected that the Islamic Affairs Department will set programmes aimed at changing the mindset of many religious teachers, imams and religious department officers.

What everyone is interested in is the October transition. Abdullah is the anointed successor. Being a suave and experienced leader, Abdullah in many ways will continue the foundations and achievements set by Dr Mahathir thus far.

As a youth leader I will surely feel a deep sense of loss once Dr Mahathir departs. However, it is anticipated that Abdullah himself once again will use his resolve and suaveness to persuade Dr Mahathir to continue contributing to national and international developments. The Muslim ummah needs him. The developing countries need him.

Many in important positions are wondering whether they will be replaced. The world is watching to see if there will be major policy changes. I also happen to believe that Abdullah is not about to upset the status quo while admitting that there must be changes.

Abdullah will govern by consensus. He will listen more, and will sparingly show his steely resolve. Dr Mahathir's strong-willed and charismatic leadership will be missed. In its place, Malaysia will witness a collective leadership.

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