

09/03/2003

Real battle shaping up

Shamsul Akmar

THE coronation of the ninth Sultan of Selangor was a regal affair. For the elite and cream of society, they got to attend the function at Istana Alam Shah in Klang yesterday.

For the common folk, they got to see it live on television over RTM1 and had an overview of almost everything during the coronation.

However, such a ceremony does not get that much attention in the public as it used to a decade or so ago.

Then, it was not just a matter of the common people being interested in such functions but they could not help but be aware of it as the media went all out to highlight it.

The change in the approach towards dealing with Malay Rulers came about after the constitutional crisis of 1992/93 when the political elite decided they had enough of the excesses committed by the royalty.

It was a successful campaign waged by the political elite because the displeasure they felt towards the excesses and misdemeanour of the Rulers was shared by the rakyat, especially the opinion-shaping middle class.

The crisis had actually broken the regality of the Rulers as the community became aware that they were the ones who could determine rulers' loyalty and not the other way round.

The crisis and subsequently the ability to ensure that Rulers do not misbehave and stick to their role as constitutional monarchs is considered by a renowned veteran journalist as the most important achievement by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"He was the articulator of middle-class Malays during the crisis."

In short, it was one of the milestones of the winding Malay Muslim political journey.

It injected a new culture into the community that affected the Malay Muslim political culture.

If prior to that, respect accorded to leaders was by virtue of their position, the crisis ensured, at least among the critical middle class, that such respect was earned.

With that, not only Malay Rulers were subjected to more critical "subjects", politicians too were scrutinised more closely.

In fact, the 1998 Umno political crisis reflected how easily Malay Muslims could just turn their back on the party.

While the Rulers and Malay political elite represented by Umno try to come to terms with the more critical Malay masses, another group of political elite emerged and rode on the wave created by the disgruntled community.

These new breed of politicians dabble in what is termed as political Islam and their representation is made through Pas.

Pas has existed almost as long as Umno, but its early struggle was along the line of Umno's Malay nationalism though laced with an Islamic agenda.

The political Islam promoted by present-day Pas started two decades ago, but seemed to peak only after the Umno crisis of 1998.

But it was there since the early 1980s, waiting for the right time to take over from where the Rulers and Umno left.

In the past, Malay Muslims were subservient and not critical of the Rulers because they believed that the monarchs were the last bastion to defend their rights and privileges.

In the past too, Malay Muslims were not prepared to be overly critical

of Umno for fear that the community's political power may be diminished and with that, their comfort zone, derived from the privileges and rights, may be punctured.

Today, however, Pas leaders enjoy even more than what the two Malay power bases used to in the past.

Said a divisional Umno leader from Kelantan:

"You cannot talk sense to Pas supporters. To them, whatever their leaders say is not to be questioned."

However, Pas leaders, including their mursyidul aam (spiritual adviser) Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, have brushed such accusations aside.

Their argument was that there was no reason for their supporters not to listen to them as what they had said were decrees of God and Prophet Muhammad as stated in the Quran and in accordance with hadith (prophetic traditions).

Whether the contention is true or otherwise, the fact remains - Pas leaders enjoy the respect and support of supporters who are unquestioning and committed to their cause.

The only question is how big is the number of Malay Muslims, especially from the middle class, who have embraced Pas in such a manner?

The last general election is not a good yardstick as emotions were highly charged. Furthermore, some Malay Muslims who turned to Pas were former Umno supporters who became disenchanted with the leadership crisis in the party.

An observer, however, believed that there was a danger of formerly pro-Umno Malays turning to be "hardcore" Pas supporters in the long run.

"Those close to Umno, especially from the middle class, are usually moderate Muslims who are professionals. They are not students of Islam and as such, what they understand about the religion is its philosophy and the basic tenets such as performing their religious obligations.

"Political Islam, its struggles and direction are not something which many understand. Since Pas leaders have articulated these aspects of the religion well, be it according to the true interpretation of Islam or otherwise, it is enough to convince the ignorants."

There is some truth to what he said. Such loyalty and subservience to leaders with Islamic credentials has been seen in other movements.

Many Malay middle-class professionals who were never aware of political Islam found enlightenment through their association with Pas leaders and thinkers. Their disenchantment with Umno become a catalyst for the whole process.

At the same time, there have also been cases of such Malays deciding to abandon Pas after they became more "enlightened" and that gives hope to Umno in taking on the former in its own game.

However, it is not going to be easy for Umno as getting Pas members and sympathisers to be "critical" of the party leadership will take some time if breaking the subservience of Malays to the Rulers are to be taken as an example.

This will actually be the real battle between Umno and Pas. For Umno, it has to struggle to break the grip Pas has on the mind of Malay Muslims.

For Pas, it has to ensure that it continues to have the grip and at the same time attempt to spread the grip among more Malay Muslims.

While the two slug it out for power, Malay Rulers have to come to terms that there exists some disillusionment towards them among the community.

The crux of the matter is that the Malay royalty must avoid becoming an endangered species.