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Simmering discontent in Umno could ruin BN's chances

Tan Siok Choo

MONTHS before the 1990 Umno elections, a mutual friend invited me to lunch to meet one of the party's vice-presidents.

Although successful in retaining his position in the 1997 party polls he was, because he was a member of Team B who had collectively challenged Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad three years earlier, dropped from the Cabinet.

Bereft of ministerial position, the Umno vice-president's office in a travel agency in Menara Tun Razak was next to the stock broking firm that I worked for.

Over lunch, not once did he complain about his dismissal from the Cabinet.

Acknowledging he faced a herculean task defending his vice-presidency without government position or support from top party leaders, he was aware that failure could jeopardise his political career.

Using a metaphor from athletics, he told me: "To remain in the race, I have to win the heats."

That was our only lunch meeting. Months later, he succeeded in retaining his vice-presidency in the Umno polls and was re-admitted to the Cabinet. Today, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister.

Although he is now at the pinnacle of political power, his capacity to disappoint wannabe ministers, Members of Parliament, Menteri Besar and State Assemblymen exceeds his ability to delight.

There are only 28 Cabinet positions, 219 parliamentary constituencies (an increase of 25) and 567 State seats (a jump of 63 seats) to be shared among Barisan Nasional component parties.

For every position, the number of aspirants will be significantly higher. Umno alone has more than two million members, 191 division heads and 49 supreme council members.

Unless recently displaced Umno division heads like Datuk Paduka Ibrahim Ali exhibit the same serenity and acceptance that Abdullah displayed when he was dismissed from the Cabinet, their simmering discontent - if allowed to continue unchecked - could threaten the Barisan Nasional's margin of victory in the next general election.

Although the Barisan Nasional won a two-thirds majority in Parliament and secured control in 11 out of 13 State Governments in the 1999 general election, the first-past-the-post system tends to overstate the ruling coalition's strength.

In the 1999 general election, the Barisan Nasional obtained 3.09 million votes or 54 per cent of the total ballots issued (i.e. including spoilt votes and unreturned ballots) for parliamentary seats while the Opposition's share was 2.41 million votes or 44 per cent.

This means the gap between the BN and the Opposition is just 680,000 votes or 10 per cent of the total ballots issued.

Theoretically, therefore, a swing of more than 340,000 votes (or greater than five per cent) could cause the BN to lose the majority of the popular vote.

At Federal level, Malaysia is like a three-legged stool. Malay-majority seats account for slightly more than half of the parliamentary seats; mixed seats and Chinese-majority seats comprise just under one-quarter of the total while the combined seats from Sarawak and Sabah make up the remaining one quarter.

Under the first-past-the-post system, it is theoretically possible for the Barisan Nasional to lose the popular vote and yet win the majority of parliamentary seats.

Because of the distribution of parliamentary seats, victory at Federal

level requires support from the different ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia as well from Sabah and Sarawak.

Opposition parties enjoy only pockets of support in Peninsular Malaysia and have failed to make a significant impact among voters in Sabah and Sarawak.

This suggests the Barisan Nasional's continued hold on power at parliamentary level is secure.

Analysis of slim majority seats at State level, however, reveals a less comforting picture. A slim majority seat is defined as one where the margin of victory is less than 20 per cent.

In 1999, at State level, there were 107 slim majority seats out of a total of 504. Perak and Selangor had the highest number (18 each), followed by Pahang (15), Terengganu (14) and Kedah (10).

Proportionately, Terengganu ranked first. Out of 32 seats in the legislative assembly, Pas won 28 seats. However, its majority was 20 per cent or less in 10 State seats and less than 30 per cent in another four seats.

Provided Umno retains the four seats it won with a slim majority and increases support in the State by more than 15 per cent, it could add another 14 seats now held by Pas to its tally.

Statistically speaking, wresting back control of Terengganu is a possibility for Umno.

Conversely, in Selangor, out of 48 seats in the State legislature, the Barisan Nasional won a thumping 42 seats. However, 12 were won with a slim majority, of which nine were Malay-majority seats.

Similarly, in Perak, the Barisan Nasional won 44 of the 52 seats with 13 seats falling in the slim majority category, while in Pahang the comparable figures are 30 of 38 State seats with 10 slim majority seats.

Provided the voter swing is only 10 per cent, loss of all the slim majority seats in Selangor, Perak and Pahang will not threaten the Barisan Nasional's hold on power in these States.

Assuming the Opposition retains the State seats they now hold, a 10 per cent swing could cause the ruling coalition to lose its two-thirds majority in these three States.

Statistical analysis, however, reveals some worrying trends. Over the last three general elections, Pas is the only political party that has consistently increased its share of the popular vote at parliamentary and State levels.

This underscores its increasing appeal among voters.

Even more remarkable, it is the only political party that garners more votes at State level than at parliamentary level.

Traditionally, Opposition parties obtain more votes at Federal than at State level because voters split their support - electing a strong opposition in Parliament and voting for the ruling coalition to look after their basic needs at State level.

Pas' upsurge in popular support in the 1999 election was clearly due to its ability to capitalise on voter dissatisfaction with the Barisan Nasional, its ability to harvest almost all the support from new voters and the lacklustre performance of the DAP and Keadilan.

Although the DAP increased its share of the popular vote in 1999, its total tally was well below that gained in 1990.

Surprisingly, Keadilan failed to capitalise on public sympathy for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

In the 1999 election, Keadilan obtained 687,146 votes - about 75,000 more votes than the number cast for Semangat 46 in 1995 but well below the 757,102 votes the latter polled in 1990.

What all these figures suggest is that discontent within Umno coupled with an extended bout of sulking could be costly for the ruling coalition in the next general election.

* The writer is a Visiting Fellow at ISIS Malaysia. The opinions expressed here are the author's personal views and should not be

attributed to any organisation she is associated with. She can be contacted at: schoo@noordinsopiee.com.