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Uncharted territory for NGOs

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INTERESTING changes are being proposed by the Elections Commission (EC) to make the next election more open, transparent and healthy.

Right now, there are ongoing discussions among the commission, Barisan Nasional and Opposition representatives to fine-tune the Elections Offences Act 1954.

And while at it, last week there was a proposal about non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) participation in the elections. But somehow, NGOs have not really responded to the suggestion.

Either way, I believe this issue should spark off some exciting debate. Would or rather, should activists become politicians?

Martin Luther King once said, "The best partnership is one with the Government and the NGOs."

So perhaps, this was Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed's real intention when he said that NGOs could contest in the general election if they were registered as political parties.

Perhaps, this is also in line with the Prime Minister's quest for excellence like in education, civil service and his recent economic stimulus package. Dr Mahathir may want a competitive election so that there is meritocracy in the candidates as well.

However, the core message here is - the Government is shifting its political ground to a higher level. Probably a move like this is meant to keep Barisan Nasional component parties on their toes. Or even reinforce the idea that our political leaders must perform at the grassroots level.

Locally, since the 1980s NGOs have created an autonomous public sphere and have been at the vanguard of reform. For instance, Sisters in Islam, Malaysian AIDS Council, Hak Manusia Malaysia, and consumer groups like Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) have used their research and experience to educate the public.

Worldwide we have seen the effect of the women's liberation movement, peace movements and environmental organisations that have made a change in the political spectrum.

So the best-case scenario will be a government that is able to tap the expertise and energy of the NGOs to alleviate public problems. The Women and Family Development Ministry, for instance, has funded several of the NGO's on-going projects that have a common cause as the Government. The partnership has so far proved effective in selective areas.

But to actually register an NGO as a political party will definitely have its setbacks and may not be a feasible idea in the long run.

It will never be easy to register as a party. There are organisations that have been waiting for years to be registered. Take Parti Sosialis Malaysia, for instance, said one activist.

Others have even dismissed this with, Nothing is going to happen.

Why even bother to discuss it?

And to facilitate this doubt, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said that the finetuning of the definition of political parties in the Registration Act 1996 will be proposed to the Cabinet before NGOs register as political parties.

There are about 800 NGOs in the country and some will have an appetite to join the elections. Without finetuning there will be havoc in the elections, he said.

But cynics being cynics will find fault in anything. Many have little

confidence in the Government or its will to change things. It is easier to criticise the Government and reinforce the belief that they are barred from politics.

Perhaps the time has come to bury this illusion and take up the Government's invitation, if you could call it that. I believe something in the right direction, however small the consequences, is better than nothing.

A legitimate process has to begin. Perhaps it has even begun.

And more pertinently, will NGOs want to become political parties? There are many drawbacks in this conversion. Firstly, is it really easy to register as political party?

Secondly, even if the party is registered, people will be sceptical of the NGOs' intention. Well if they win, it is good for them. But if they do not they may lose credibility. Will they want to take that chance?

Besides, when the NGO-turned-politician knocks at our door, we will wonder, "How can they 'voice our rights' and 'ask for votes' in the same breath?" Activists are not supposed to be in the pursuit of power. They are supposed to be selfless in search of a larger good.

Since NGOs are highly focused on a single issue will they have the interest to take on the ideological and non-partisan political perspective?

And then there is the question of funds. Can NGOs afford to pay for the cost of campaigning? Can they print and distribute millions of posters or brochures to reach out to the public? Will they get prime time TV slots and front-page scoops?

Lack of resources, both human and financial, will make it difficult for NGOs to compete meaningfully.

We have seen the world-wide success of the Green Party movement, which grew out of the grass roots environmental activism in 1960s and which has matured enough to grapple with global trade policies and political reform.

However, in spite of the influence and contribution it has not been successful in elections like in the case of Ralph Nader in the United States.

The success story, especially the recent fallout because of some election rules, is also noteworthy here.

Finally, NGO spells non-governmental. We need a politics of governance. But we also need someone to personally bring a victim who cannot even write his name to address a policy issue as soon as the need arises.