

Managing the burden of victory
Malaysiakini.com
Mar 10, 2008
Yeo Yang Poh

The 8th day of March 2008 was a milestone in Malaysian history, and the 9th witnessed a new dawn. MCPX

For half a century, Malaysians - for reasons both real and imagined - have got accustomed to living under a political monopoly, believing and fearing that any substantial change would be detrimental to their own interest. It was, in part, an indoctrinated fear.

That psychological shackle of fear has now been broken.

The Barisan Nasional (BN and predecessor Alliance), having ruled since Independence, is naturally wondering why its iron-fisted monopoly has been so suddenly and unexpectedly breached. For the sake of moving the nation forward, this inquiry, if it can be carried out with brutal and painful frankness, will be a meaningful one.

The reasons for this moment of truth are multiple and complex, almost too numerous to list. But I suggest that they include the following factors.

(a) There is no denying that the coalition formula was necessary for the attainment of independence. The spirit of working together, as equal partners, was both admirable and essential. Equal, that is, though not in terms of numbers, but in terms of rights and responsibilities. However, over the years, the gradual erosion of this spirit, brought about by the greed for power and wealth, has betrayed the essence of the coalition formula, and turned it from a winning formula into an oppressive one.

(b) To maintain power and control, it became expedient to arrange politics according to race, in order to divide and rule, first along racial lines, and then along religious ones. The coalition became equal only in the payment of lip service. It was increasingly difficult to convince the affected persons that this was a partnership of equals, while their representatives were compelled to continue insisting that it was one.

(c) The preoccupation of the ruling elite in pursuing personal power and wealth, fuelled by an unbroken string of successes no matter how audacious their conduct, had entrenched a culture of ignoring the genuine needs and wishes of the people. The citizens' voices of appeal grew louder and louder, but were met with either with a deaf ear or insincere promises that were repeatedly broken. Those who dared to turn up the volume of their complaints were harshly dealt with. But the people could not be fooled forever. Carrots delivered just before each election might have worked for a while, but could not work indefinitely. And the people could not be cowed forever.

(d) For decades Malaysians with genuine grouses or who wished to offer solutions for societal problems were paternally told: 'If you want something (that ought to be yours in the first place), come and work within the system'. That might have been acceptable if the system in fact works. For most, the experience of working within the system soon became one of 'begging the system', with small successes and huge frustrations. Is it surprising, then, that a time came when the people said that enough is enough?

(e) A system of this nature allows sycophants and leaders with personal agenda to

thrive, while those who wish to reveal the truth and improve the lot of the people are at best ignored and at worst persecuted. Such is the perfect recipe for an eventual downfall.

(f) This phenomena, and many others, manufactured a host of fatal problems such as endemic corruption, depletion of national resources, inequity in the distribution of resources, abuse of power, and the like; in short, it spawned an unfair society. It was only a matter of time before simmering discontent acquired an erupting force.

(g) Arrogance on the part of the ruling elite (again because of their unbroken record of successes and the fear tactics that they had no reservations about using) made them blind to the repeated warnings that things were about to boil over. The use of threats, splashed on the front pages of newspapers in the days leading to the election, sickened many, and probably backfired. Some of those threats had clear racial undertones. Malaysians surprised the BN by rising above the racial divide (such as in Penang and Klang). The BN had underestimated the growing maturity of the electorate.

There are of course many more reasons and causes than these. If the BN wants to regain lost ground, it has to pay sincere heed to frank advice, and remedy its serious shortcomings.

Victory of the people

Now that the political monopoly has been broken in a number of states, and the future prospect of breaking the same at the federal level has become an attainable goal rather than a dream, the opposition (now the ruling party in five states) has a mountain of work ahead. So much hope is pinned on their shoulders.

Among the most important things that its leaders must do are:

(i) Never to forget, not even in their sleep, that their much-improved victory is not their victory, but the victory of the people; thus they must serve the people with humility and dedication; they should be proud, not of their success, but of the people who have enabled them to succeed;

(ii) To quickly learn the ropes of governing, although teething problems are inevitable; be transparent and frank with the people, and remedy any errors as soon as these are discovered - while the people expect perfect honesty, they will be forgiving about imperfections in the execution of tasks, when things are done transparently;

(iii) To identify and divide tasks into various categories: those that require urgent attention, short-term goals, long-term policies, and so on; set timelines for each task, though not cast in stone, and make every effort to keep to them; engage or employ the right people for the right jobs and outsource if need be;

(iv) Pay immediate attention to the most burning issues, such as the economy, poverty, equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, security, etc.

(v) Set up effective oversight mechanisms immediately, especially in relation to financial matters, the processing and granting of permits and contracts, and corruption in the public sector; this must include strict monitoring of the members of the Opposition themselves, to ensure that no corruption or cronyism is practised;

(vi) Set up an effective mechanism to receive and address complaints from the public;
and

(vii) Ensure that there is no in-fighting among leaders, for this will quickly destroy the faith that Malaysians have placed in them by giving them this unprecedented opportunity.

The challenge for the opposition in the coming months and years is a huge one. There will be many more ways to fail in this challenge than to succeed.

The parties have to be always vigilant, honest and humble. Their members will not be exempt from frequent visits by the demons of human weaknesses.

But the same people who have put them there can as easily reverse the decision if they should betray the faith. Checks and balances are essential for any system of government.

Whatever their political persuasions may be, Malaysians will benefit from the change. Let us all get down to hard, honest work.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79538>