

**Time for country to embrace new kind of politics**  
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Most people in the country were taken aback by the trouncing of Barisan Nasional (BN) by the loose coalition of non-BN parties two days ago. However, I am also surprised by the way the media covered the elections results and their refusal to change their ways even after sensing the ground swell or tsunami.

For one, it should be noted that one of a very significant paradigm change the media organisations need to be familiar with is the phrase 'Pembangkang/Opposition'. Previously when BN held control in all state assemblies and the Parliament, the phrase was clear-cut.

But now, we cannot refer to BN as kerajaan and the other parties as pembangkang anymore since BN is now pembangkang in five states with a sizeable number of voters. It seems until today, most media organisations have missed that point. To refer the parties as non-BN parties will be more appropriate.

Secondly, during coverage of the election results, most of the TV commentators were not neutral in their commentaries. Although the TV stations invited non-politicians, their commentaries were just like any one of the BN leaders; talking about 'they' when referring to PKR, PAS or DAP and 'we' when referring to BN. The TV presenters were also using similar vocabularies.

Because of this inability to shift the paradigm, the analyses given by most commentators during the TV and radio coverage, and in newspapers the past two days were shallow, biased and some based on conjectures. They have failed to gauge and identify the actual reasons for such shifts in allegiances. At one point, I realised that the commentators, reporters and editors were and are still in a state of denial.

The above inability of the media organisations to distance themselves from BN, was actually one of the contributing factors to this debacle. In the run-up to the election, the television channels not only failed to give a fair coverage to the other parties, but continued to carry lies and negative reports on them. It is one thing if you do not want to report their side of the story, but you should not have allowed yourselves to be a BN mouthpiece spreading wrong information.

The print news media particularly the Malay dailies were also to blame. If you were to flip through Utusan Malaysia, for example, prior to the election, you will find not a single mention of the non-BN parties except in the negative light or rebuttal of their views which were never published in the first place. It seemed that the newspaper reporters and editors have been turned into BN spokesmen. I am still at a loss at trying to understand why they sacrifice the sacred principle of 'being truthful' and were willing to breach basic ethic of journalism of reporting the truth.

These blatant breaches of religious commandment and ethics of journalism are pathetic. By stooping so low in generating lies and propaganda on behalf of the BN, the electronic and print news media have lost their credibility as respectable media organisations. When honest reporting has been thrown out of the window, how can you compare yourselves to reputable organisations such as the Singapore's Channel News Asia, let alone the BBC or CNN? I think it is like the Malay saying seperti langit dengan bumi. Even the Indonesian

news media organisations are ahead of us in this matter.

It seems that the dinosaurs within BN have not realised that times have changed. Such tactics might be useful and successful in the sixties and seventies. However, in this age of the blogs, Yahoo! YouTube and Ipods, intelligent voters no longer rely on the BN-controlled media which has been proven to be unreliable sources of information. Why should they rely on the media which reports nothing but lies?

What is more damaging, the voters also see the unfair use of the media as further proof of gross misuse of power and injustice by the BN. In other words, the blatant use of the media for party propaganda has indeed backfired! Again to quote a Malay saying, senjata makan tuan.

This brings us to the main issues underlying the rejection of BN by voters across the board. Contrary to the superficial observations from the commentators and reporters, the issues are neither racial nor religious per se.

DAP, PAS and PKR went to the voters with one clear message, that although BN has brought good development for the country, it has abused its power, forming a feudalistic patronising culture based on corruption and scandals of enormous proportions. The non-BN parties contended that while failing to tackle the woes of the common folks who are being hard-pressed with unbridled rise in the prices of goods, petrol, toll charges and education expenses, the BN leaders continue their lavish lifestyles in contrast to the image of simple and austere lifestyle of leaders of the other parties, particularly the Kelantan Menteri Besar.

The abuse of power by BN leaders can be seen in terms of misusing government assets for party use, continuing to equate the BN with the government. From electronic media to newspapers, schools to mosques, balairaya to stadiums, official cars to official aircrafts, various government facilities were (mis)used prior to and during the election campaigns. The sight of the deputy prime minister having a cozy cuddle with his daughter aboard a government aircraft during a campaign trail provided an irrefutable proof of this particular grievance.

According to the non-BN parties, the culmination of this power abuse is in the meddling with the Election Commission (EC). This started with the insistence of reappointing the retiring BN-friendly EC chairperson even to the extent of amending the laws to accommodate his age.

The EC then made rules which could only be interpreted as favouring the BN, changing them at last minute, again in what is perceived as trying to salvage a sinking BN ship. The change in rules with regard to the statutory declaration and the cancellation of indelible ink usage could easily be interpreted as proof of EC collusion to retain BN in power.

The second big issue in the minds of voters is the rising cost of living. The BN through the various media has tried in vain to tackle this issue in two ways, first by warning of the potential bankruptcy faced by the government if it increases the subsidies of goods, petrol and toll-charges and secondly by comparing local prices of basic goods with those of our neighbours. But the BN-linked media has lost its credibility.

It seems the voters rejected the bankrupt argument outright, citing increase exports in petroleum and palm oil exports, whose prices have risen sharply bringing in more income to the government which in turn should have been used to further reduce the prices of basic necessities.

On the other hand, the other parties successfully convinced the voters that the so-called bankruptcy will be more likely if BN is allowed to continue in power, quoting previous examples of scandals allegedly involving many BN leaders such as PKFZ, the navy patrol vessels project, IKBN and the Scorpene submarine and Sukhoi jet purchases. It was contended that besides palm oil and Petronas income, the total amount of 'illegal money' involved in such scandals could easily be used to offset any rise in basic goods and petrol.

The voters also did not buy the hollow argument of price comparison with neighbouring countries. PKR leaders brought out data which conclusively proved that the so-called price comparison was flawed since it did not actually take into consideration the buying power of neighbouring countries.

The petrol price comparison fail to impress voters because it is natural that prices in a petroleum producing country should be lower than in non-producing neighbours.

These intelligent voters were also particularly angry by suggestions by BN leadership for people to adapt and change their lifestyles to more austere ones while the BN leaders continue with their extravagant lifestyles buying new official aircraft, buildings and cars as well as building personal palatial homes and purchasing unique car registration numbers.

The above weakness of BN's defence of price rises, coupled with PAS's offer of a welfare state resonated well with the voters. Of course, there was also a tinge of racial gripe. The Indians were particularly fed-up with BN because they claimed the MIC leadership was not doing enough to fight for the welfare of their people. The economic cake did not reach the grassroots in the rubber estates and construction sites. Instead, the MIC leadership is seen to be obsessed with power struggles and collection of personal wealth. On the other hand, the MCA and Gerakan were seen to be too timid in standing up for Chinese rights, for example in the issue of teaching of mathematics and science in English.

To cap it all, there is the image problems of the BN president himself. One concerns his tendency to doze off during events and meetings, the other his image of being 'absent when disaster struck'. One particular complaint was his petty trip to Perth when heavy floods hit the country in early 2007. But none is more damaging, particularly among devoutly Muslim voters, than the image of his family's un-Islamic attire and his 'a bit over-friendly' gestures to his female guests and well-wishers. For someone being portrayed as Islamically-inclined with his version of Islam Hadhari, the president needs to be more sensitive to such issues. Some voters were also wary of his family's and friends close relationship to Singaporeans at various levels.

Until and unless the BN starts a soul-search and recognise the above issues and makes a concerted effort tackle them head-on, the party risks of becoming obsolete and extinct, just like the dinosaurs of old. To reinvent itself, BN has to leave the ways of old third-class politics. We vividly remember that after the hotly contested 1999 elections, the BN did not take that route of self-criticism and soul-searching.

Instead they went on the rampage, cutting off aid to Terengganu, serving a gag-order on government servants and university students, strengthening the grip on the media and government institutions, stopping support for religious schools, and taking punitive actions on non-BN supporters. We hope that this time BN will not resort to such kind of third-class politics.

The message sent by the voters on Saturday was clear. It is a vote for a change of culture

and paradigm. It is a signal for the government not to take the rakyat for granted. After 50 years of independence, it is time for the country to embrace the new kind of politics; politics free from intimidation and patronage.

Let's start to embrace this wind of change, let's start with a credible and respectable media.

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