

Change : Pak Lah now the one to do it
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As the season for grand, over-searching analyses and frenetic calls for 're-invention, regeneration, resign' gets underway, we shall be first of all drowned by frivolity. Fun, yes, but potentially spiteful, wicked also fractious and dangerous. MCPX

Our democracy flourishes ever more with each election, alas, its major strands and course were fixed by Umno chieftains and MCA tow kay who made a pact in 1952 to fight the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections as a unit.

This amazing democracy of ours is seemingly flawed yet remarkable in its efficacy to build this nation. The whole structure rests on a wide web of concessions and consensus. The Chinese and the Indians wished then and now to keep their culture and vernacular schools while participating in a vigorous political process presided over by a cohesive and importantly benevolent Umno. Each time the structure of balances sways, the nation convulses. This is how fragile things are; should Umno loses more than 20 parliamentary seats, recriminations follow because it is unable to be kind and powerful at once.

Worse, the strident elements within the component parties will be inclined to push the limits in drawing bigger concessions from Umno. For the formula agreed in 1952 to last a century and beyond, Umno is required to adapt, change, toss out the bad guys and embrace new ideas and talents all the time.

As a reforming entity, Umno has at every crisis point been able to get up after a severe backlash. After the 1999 shocks it searched for answers strenuously. New talent was brought in. Similarly now, the nation is conceivably waiting for Umno to bounce back with a pronounced change. Umno boasts the biggest collection of credible professionals and thinkers massed on one side versus a burgeoning class of full-time political operators. They latter thrive partly on the inability of a slice of the grassroots to be self-reliant. Every wakil rakyat who lives in the constituency doles out several hundred ringgit each morning as they wake up to a small congregation at their doorsteps.

To fund this billion-ringgit sprawling, informal welfare society, the politicians pull out all stops to conceive plans to earn more. This feeds the bursting patronage structure. Soon, only those individuals with sufficient tenacity and guile to work the system are left standing. Pak Lah set out to shake things, flush out the rogues and create more space for the learned ones to assert themselves. He was frustrated at every juncture.

Pak Lah began to lose considerable ground and faith among the voters by accommodating the more dubious elements in Umno some with absolutely no qualms about resorting to arm-twisting and threats. The voters could sense Pak Lah's unease at this compromise and grew disenchanted when he seemed to have lost the resolve to cleanse the system. The biggest indictment, or rather perception, against the Umno types was that they have enriched themselves by means not deemed to be fair and just.

Pak Lah is now the one with the virtues and stature to turn things around by getting all bidders of lucrative projects to present their case before an esteemed panel of retired judges, vice- chancellors and technocrats. The entire bidding process of government projects worth say RM100 million and above will have to be reported by the press. This may

slow down the pace of development a little but it is going to be worth the trouble in that it will burnish the global competency of our businessmen.

Segments of Umno will groan. They would be placated should Pak Lah show the desire of winning the arguments decisively. Umno has for two decades functioned as the biggest conduit and catchment of the New Economic Policy. Enough funds had been distributed within the Umno economic system to elevate millions into the middle classes in a silent and most successful engineering.

This experiment has lapsed. In the meantime all those who have conducted themselves in manners unbecoming of public personages cannot be in the cabinet. The media, on its part, shall be trenchant but not be shrill in the hands of powerful individuals with interests beyond the realm of a clean, open, vigorous public forum.

Pak Lah must not spill blood; it is a spectacle he never yearns for nor can master. He should follow his conscience that is neatly compatible with the wishes of the electorate in 2004. Change is a dish best served in discreet fashion away from public glare. The people will gauge his actions not on hype constructed in a flash but on enduring deeds.

The vanquished should not be paraded in show trials; instead they shall step aside with adequate honour to rebuild their lives. The more noisy a fall the more emboldened the rest shall be in wanting to cling on at the expense of Umno and the nation.

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