

**The perils of 'eunuch politics'**  
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Some time back, Stanley Koh of Malaysiakini wrote about the history and factional politics in MCA. I find the writings interesting and they give outsider a rare look into what is happening in this party.

There is one type of politics which is practiced by Umno, MCA and some of the other parties. This is called the politics of the eunuchs, or in Mandarin Huan Guan Zheng Zi. Going back to history, in the early 15th century, during the reign of Yong Le Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, China was at its zenith and was able to spent huge sums and resources to send seven sea expeditions, led by Admiral Zheng He over three decades, down to Indian Ocean.

Some historians even said that Zheng He was the one who 'discovered' America, instead of Columbus. However, such a rich and strong dynasty met its demise within a relatively short period of 200 years. Why? Most historians attributed this to what is now known as the 'eunuch politics'. In this type of politics, the emperor would send out his men, the eunuchs, into the courts to mix with the government ministers and officials. Playing into human psychology of fear, suspicion, and jealousy, these eunuchs initially fanned these emotions and by doing so, created factions within the officials and ministers.

Once there were factions, each faction would try to outmaneuver each other and place people from their own factions into positions of influence. Factionalism also meaning frequent realignment of forces, with everyone and every faction trying hard to get into the good books of the eunuchs, so that their factions could gain power and influence over other factions. No one then cared anymore for the people. What they cared about was their own factional interest. It did not matter how good a person was, the most important criteria for promotion was how loyal that person was.

The whole political game became that of placing their own people in positions of importance, even though some of these people might be useless and corrupted. Meritocracy died a slow death and in its place, a whole lot of useless ministers were appointed, people who would only praise the emperor and the eunuchs and none would bother to criticise and speak frankly from their hearts. To speak from their hearts would be asking for sure death and destruction and who would want this type of ending when they could have luxurious and easy lives if they just played to the rules of the day and supported the eunuchs?

This way, of course, the emperor was able to consolidate his absolute power and control. But by doing so, the emperor was also sowing the seeds of destruction for the dynasty. No dynasty could last long without the practice of meritocracy and without good people daring to give frank advice to the emperor. Slowly, the country became weaker and the ordinary citizens became poorer and poorer. So much so some of them became rebellious and took up arms against the dynasty. To suppress these rebellions as well as to quell dissent, these eunuchs set up intelligence gathering organisations, the three most famous of which were the 'East Factory', the 'West Factory' and the Jin Yi Hui.

These organisations used unscrupulous ways to gather information and had torture chambers to extract forced confessions. Even prime ministers were sacked and removed if they expressed a little bit of independent thinking. The whole government court was then in a 'safe' mode. Everyone tried to play safe. Even walls had ears. So much fear was instilled

into the officials that they were really incapacitated. They were interested only to make money, partly to pay to the eunuchs to get into the latter's good books, partly because there was a need to build up their coffers to play faction politics. Corruption became rampant.

Sounds familiar? This was probably the beginning of the so-called money politics. Eunuchs would only put in a good word to the emperor on those who had bribed them, on those who were obedient, and those who had a leash on their necks for the eunuchs to control. Anyone with an independent mind would meet with early demise, some times through creating false incriminatory evidence. And sometimes, certain private indiscretions were made known to the public. Sound familiar again? The Chua Soi Lek DVD sex scandals was along this line.

With this type of control, the dynasty had no real hope but to get weaker and weaker over time. Ultimately, it was embroiled in fighting the external threat from the Manchus and internal rebellions at the same time. The dynasty ended when one general opened the gate of the Great Wall and admitted the Manchus.

History serves as a guide for posterity. The lesson here is that once the 'eunuch culture' gets entrenched, it would be hard to get rid of it. In the modern context and Malaysian politics, some of the personal assistants of leaders have been acting like these eunuchs, even though they have not been castrated. Their role is to make sure that their boss can consolidate his or her powers, and by playing this type of politics, the top leaders are able to exercise divide and rule at practically all levels of the political party. Some would use the euphemism that this is 'check and balance'.

But anyone studying politics would agree that this is a classic case of divide and rule, and by playing one faction against another, the top leader's position became unassailable. Some would be able to sit on the throne for over 20 years. Eunuch politics made a leader strong and a strong leader can further extend the play for the eunuchs, leading to a vicious cycle. Potential threats from potentially capable leaders were nipped in the bud so no one would be strong enough to challenge them.

Some became so strong that they even started a dynasty, grooming kin like sons and brothers to take over positions of influence not immediately perhaps, but in the years to come. Many MCA members have told me about their worry of a dynasty forming. Some years back, they were talking about the father and son dynasty, but now they are talking about the brotherhood dynasty. The fear among MCA members is real, because if this culture becomes entrenched, it would deal the party an even greater blow than the recent election losses. It would affect the roots and aims of the party.

Some other parties are practicing eunuch politics to a lesser extent. Now, many BN component parties are talking about soul-searching and going back to their roots. It would be good for the leaders and the grassroots to remember the perils of the politics of the eunuchs, and try to shun this type of practice. There is no substitute for clean politics based on democratic principles, based on ideology and based on the respective party constitutions. There is no substitute for meritocracy, for going back to the people and speaking out on behalf of the people.

After all, politics is about people. The politician's first and last duty is to serve the interest of the people - not anything else.

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