

Old BN gone, Abdullah won't last
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Academician and author Dr Ooi Kee Beng believes the old Barisan Nasional is gone and an incompetent Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was a factor for the coalition's poor performance in the March 8 elections. MCPX

dr ooi kee beng and pak lah and umno Declaring that the political landscape has changed after the election 'earthquake', the Institute of South East Asian Studies in Singapore fellow added that the coalition's largest party Umno will be forced to reform itself.

In an interview with Malaysiakini after the launch on his second book on Abdullah's leadership, Penang-born Ooi described how the premier made the nation lose hope and the role his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad played in the elections.

Here are excerpts from the interview:

Do you think if BN has another leader like Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the party will bounce back from its election setback.

mahathir khir toyo kmu forum 010408 06I don't think so. I think Malaysians have changed. Although it was a small little thing, each individual would just cross the ballot paper in favour of the opposition but then the collective effort also had an collective effect on the consciousness of the Malaysian. Well, people say it is a tsunami but I would say it is an earthquake in a sense that the landscape actually tilted.

I believe we have come to a new era and it is for Umno to do the catching up now. You cannot be a political party and be strong in a democracy when there is a strong disconnection between your message and what the populace is now about. And the populace is now about openness, dignity and integrity.

One thing that has not been played up enough in the elections was that the opposition actually had a message. The three parties (PAS, PKR and DAP) actually tried to find a common ground.

The fact that PAS actually put the Islamic state on the shelf for the time being and used welfare state instead did make an impression on people. Even the DAP is saying that the welfare state is a word that they understand. These are small things but it does help the shift quite a bit. I don't think we're going back.

lost in transition malaysia under abdullah There is no place for BN to take back the space it once had. I think that is gone. You will then have this movement to a two-party system at the federal level but I think the federation of Malaysia is actually becoming a proper federation now.

So suddenly Umno looks like a Pahang-Johor party, DAP looks like a Penang-Perak party, PAS looks like a northern party and PKR the Malay urban party. We're going to get a federation and I think it's for the better. Perhaps it will work like India or America that whatever's local, the federal government should leave it alone, it's not your business.

You don't always have to get all of us to become one big monolith.

BN will not leave them alone given its track record.

They would have to be forced to leave them alone (laughs). At the same time I'm afraid that a giant power losing power can get nasty.

What do you think will happen if it gets nasty?

I think it would be quite localised like in certain parts of Johor where certain divisions will get rabid. I see Umno as a big ship with no wind. While the PKR is the opposite, it's a small ship with a big sail and it's got the wind. Maybe there will be slow defections and slimming down of the ship. There won't be another Mahathir. The country has moved beyond that.

A big part of Malaysia's problem is governance. Malaysians are not starving although a few are but we've got a big middle-class and the middle-class do not take it to the street and go for broke. The most they'll do is vote against the government which they've done. So they are not in that state where we will be an uprising.

We are overdramatising the votes here. If it was a normal democracy, somebody gets kicked out of power is no big deal. But it is a big deal here and now.

How do we deal with the demands now from women's groups, the Indian community, Sabah and Sarawak community for more representation? How do we resolve this governance issue?

lost in transition book launch 040408 01That is common, right? There is always too little to go around. If we were a healthy democracy, it is no problem, we'll discuss and reach an agreement. I think this is part of us maturing as a democracy. We have to accept having an opposition that disagrees is not the end of the world.

We can agree that, "oh we didn't get three women in so we'll remember next time". We can't get everything that we want. Women groups don't get everything they want, the race groups don't get what they want. In the old system, nobody felt they got anything that they wanted anyway.

How much was Abdullah a factor in the election outcome on March 8?

He was a factor in making people lose hope, I think. I'm sure that was not what he wanted because he did not turn out to be the reformist he wanted. He turned out not to have any vision apparently and he turned out to be weak and allowing his family and certain favourites to take over.

He allowed so many things to happen that could have easily been stopped. There were many simple things we were expecting him to say, "I'm not allowing this" but never happened. This why I said he got lost in transition because there was no hope.

Who's going to stop this monolithic Umno who has gotten so arrogant that it does not even

dare to hit its people on the fingers? It's symbolic, he doesn't even have to sack them but hit them on the fingers for us to see and we're okay with that. That's very little to for us ask and he didn't do it.

However, people still see Abdullah as more open to criticisms and responsive to suggestion compared to Mahathir and this works in the former's favour. How do we deal with this?

In the beginning I think we all gave Abdullah a chance and he's got his heart in the right place. But I think the despair came in when we began to sense that this guy is not up to the job and he doesn't have the vision we need and reforms cannot take forever. After four years he is asking for more time to get it done.

Little things like amending the constitution for extending the Elections Commission chairperson's term and the introduction of the watered-down version of the IPCMC (Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission). He lost control. It doesn't matter where his heart is anymore. He's lost the game. His other sources like (son in law) Khairy (Jamaluddin) or whoever has taken over.

So is this the case of Abdullah not making a big mistake but a series of small mistakes?

I think he is just incompetent (laughs). I think somehow this guy went beyond his depth.
mca youth agm 180807 khairy wave flag

Do you think Mahathir has been behind all this in discrediting Abdullah and raising issues concerning Khairy?

Well, there's no smoke without fire. I'm sure Mahathir exaggerated the whole thing but Abdullah wasn't capable of defending himself, and that's a bit worrying. He didn't seem to care to defend himself. In the end I think he has lost touch with everything.

What do you think is his fate now?

I think he won't last. Perhaps it's good that he lasts a bit (laughs). It is because there has been so much change. Umno has to change. They will change.

What kind of role do you think Mahathir will play in post-Abdullah period?

If his health keeps up after the party elections, he will make more noise than before and there will be more willing ears to listen. In that way, what he says will have an impact. I tend to think his time is up but in the Malay community, I think he is still a moral force. So what he does, still sways people.

How do you think Umno will pan out in the future - will it be the Zaid Ibrahim-type or the Malay supremacy-type?

I think it would be the Zaid Ibrahim one at least in the federal level although in the division level there are more Umno die-hards. But I think on the whole, Umno changing is not done in a vacuum either. The whole political scenario is changing while Umno changes. It would change in some correlation with the nation.

What are your views on the possibility of Pakatan Rakyat falling apart and Malaysians being unforgiving about this while BN exploits this phenomenon?

The old BN is gone. The voter will not be saying, "oh let's go back to the old ways". In the situation of choice for the voter, if PR is not making any headway, the alternative is not BN. BN now is just Umno.

The landscape has definitely changed but I don't know how to describe it yet. Like I said it was an earthquake. I didn't agree with a tsunami because after a year, everything goes back to normal but after an earthquake, things actually change.

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