

Can BN deliver the reforms promised?

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It is already more than a month since the general elections. The people have voted in the Barisan Nasional (BN) into power but with a smaller majority. They have opted for a stronger opposition in Parliament to provide a more effective check and balance of the ruling party. They want a government MCPX that is more responsible, accountable and transparent in all its dealings.

The other significant demand of the people is to do away with race politics as demonstrated by the unprecedented success of the Pakatan Rakyat which stood on a multiracial platform and pledged to champion all races. The people could not tolerate the arrogance, highhandedness, abuse of the power and race politics that was so prevalent. In short the rakyat rose above racial divide and voted for change, a change for better governance.

The opposition alliance seems to have responded positively to the demands for change. It has recognised the aspirations of the people in wanting all the races to work together and has gone all out to forge that inter-racial cooperation among them. They have set up a common platform, the Pakatan Rakyat, to implement in unison all their pre-election pledges.

The various parties have amicably ironed out the distribution of seat allocation at the various state assemblies, the post of opposition leader in Parliament and even agreed to appoint Anwar Ibrahim as the leader of the coalition without much hassle.

The people at large are happy with the Pakatan Rakyat so far but whether this happiness will continue to hold is yet to be seen. The real test will come when their initial euphoria of election victory is finally over and are confronted with the hard issues that emerge in a multi-racial and multi-religious country. This is particularly so in a country that has been so accustomed to politics along communal lines all these years.

The task is not easy but as Confucius says 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step'. At least, we have taken the first step now and our hopes for a better Malaysia have been rekindled. With a committed Pakatan Rakyat and the support of the people I do not see why we should fail to achieve what others have done so.

Over at the BN's camp everything seems to be going haywire. They have yet to accept the verdict of the people. The MIC was given a fatal blow by Makkal Sakthi and has been made totally irrelevant with its leader still refusing to step down despite calls from his own members. So are the Gerakan and PPP. The MCA is struggling to remain relevant by trying hard to revamp its organisation but with little success so far.

These parties are desperately calling for a merger to form a multiracial BN as they foresee their demise if they continue with their communal politics. Their fate to a large extent depends not themselves but on their Umno. Is Umno in a position to come to their rescue? Is it ready for multiracial politics? With its own internal turmoil can Umno find the formula to connect to their Chinese and Indian partners in the coalition?

Umno meanwhile is in crisis, undergoing a serious struggle for power. The damage done at the polls appears to be minor compared to that being done by the various factions trying to

topple its leadership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, whom they blame solely for their defeat. Ironically even his predecessor, Dr Mahathir - who was largely responsible for laying the foundation for BN's defeat - has become the fiercest critic of Abdullah, describing him as being shameless and even referring to him as 'Sultan Abdullah Shah'.

The main problem with Abdullah was his failure to initiate radical reforms since he took office in 2003. The people gave him an overwhelming majority in 2004 but he failed to capitalise on that mandate to introduce that badly-needed reforms. He allowed the ills of the Mahathir rule to continue into his. He failed the people miserably by his inaction to make changes. He continued with the policies and the leaders of the previous regime that were detested by the people.

The people expected him to introduce changes to strengthen the judiciary and make it truly independent, fight corruption, resolve inter-racial and inter-religious disputes and make the government more accountable and transparent. Not only he failed in these but he also failed to check those who were abusing the system for their benefit and the benefits of their cronies.

The people now want change and reforms and the BN should implement them without delay. Abdullah should get a new team that is more dynamic and professional and start working on these reforms if he wants to survive the onslaught by his critics from within and without his party. He should go down to the grassroots, meet the people in all states including those controlled by the opposition and put forward his plans for radical change. It may take time for reforms to take effect but he must be seen to be reacting to their demands.

He can start by offering an apology, on behalf of the government, to the former Lord President and his colleagues who were humiliated. He should act fast to form a judicial commission, give full autonomy to the Anti-Corruption Agency, grant more freedom to the media to highlight the people's plight, form a high-level task force to look into ways of eradicating poverty regardless of race, release all ISA detainees and take steps to repeal the draconian law, actively promote racial integration by being fair to all and act against the 'little Napoleons' who are out to sabotage government policies.

It is sad that instead of getting together to make amends for the losses and consolidating the party, Umno is bent on changing its leader. Instead of giving Abdullah a time frame to set things right and step down they are demanding he do so immediately. Will the departure of Pak Lah overcome the problems of Umno and the BN?

If the present squabbles in Umno continue I am afraid that it will not be able to continue leading the coalition effectively and there is real fear that its partners will be forced to leave. Umno must get its acts together to rejuvenate itself and the other partners if its coalition if wants to remain relevant to the new generations of Malaysians. It is timely for Abdullah and his Umno to seriously consider forming a multiracial BN that would pave the way to create a two-party system that will benefit all Malaysians.