

Will Mahathir be a Mandela? Or a Mugabe?

Malaysiakini.com

Apr 16, 2008

HA Lee

The 'peoples-that-be' seek renewal and reconciliation while powers-that-be crave denial and vengeance. Folks want to get on with new state administrations but federal powers want to punish their voting preference by cutting funds and curtailing state government functions. There comes a proposal, from within the BN cabinet no less, to apologise to the long-suffering judges and families of the 1988 judicial tragedy. The idea is swiped down, by the cabinet of course, with no reasonable explanation. MCPX

I reckon most of us would like to move on with a new agenda. But Umno's ancient and old guard hotly pursue their vendettas. The venom flows mostly within the party, but it remains the historically predominant and still hefty party. Whatever happens inside Umno tends to affect the lives of those outside it as well.

The question is, can Malaysia move on without its leaders deflating their egos for the common good? Can we smoothen the scars without one leader, namely Mahathir, owning up to his role in inflicting the wounds in the first place? I think we can, but it would be better if he did.

We could take a fast forward position and not bother. The Mahathir era is past and his aura inexorably fades, Umno is trying to avoid self-destruction, BN's race-based parties scramble for relevance, and a significant squad of the old guard fell at the ballot. But if this old guard carries with their demise the silence towards misdeeds and mistakes that have become so embedded in our psyche, we will leave behind a dark past without gaining new light. Perhaps, by their vindictive tendencies they can only think that citizens will also bay for blood if they admit they did something bad or wrong?

I believe most of us would rather see truth than punishment. We would rather pursue reconciliation than retribution.

It will be a shame if a departing generation of leaders leave us so little of enduring values to pass on. We have suffered the loss of not knowing what really happened on May 13, 1969, because no leader has come forth with a truthful witness account. Okay, perhaps that's too flammable. But what of money politics, corruption, spates of ethnic disharmony, derailment of Vision 2020?

We could, especially if we sympathise with Pakatan Rakyat, welcome the infighting within the BN's larger parties. Let them growl and rip at each other and neuter their capacity to administrate. Federal bullying of state governments can certainly backfire. Mahathir is damaging Abdullah more than the opposition ever can, and the opposition holds out a more palatable future.

This would be a strategic posture to assume, and well, it is not our business to interfere with party affairs. I would still find it lamentable, though, that Mahathir's tantrums, laughable as they are, expend so much breath spewing vengeance. To be an amused bystander to his antics is not to gain much.

The vast portion of responsibility for our malaise must fall on Mahathir's lap. But where do we go from here? We could dismiss his invective, leave him to fester in his fury and stay the

bitterest man in Malaysia. Anyway, he does not take kindly to counsel.

Yet, perhaps he can be reminded that his rage is doing his legacy no good. He insisted before retiring that he didn't care about legacy; he has shown - since Abdullah didn't turn out to be a clone - that he cares about legacy more than anything else. He railed against discontinuation of his pet mega-projects. These days he waxes hypocritical about press freedom, strong opposition, even review of the egregious University and University Colleges Act.

His behaviour is more opportunism than legacy-related, but he clearly wants to recover some loss. Will he realise that the meaningful way to salvage his place in history is by coming clean with his role in the corruption of institutions he now bemoans?

Oh yes, he does care about his legacy, and funnily, some of us do too - for the sake of this nation. Nobody has left a mark on present day Malaysia, for better or worse, as much as Mahathir. He could leave it to time and inquiry to chronicle uncomfortable truths about his reign that, frankly, many of us already know even if they are not in newspapers or textbooks. We can fill in the blanks of his biography and account for the ways he subjugated our democratic institutions, allowed corruption to permeate, and presided over our education system's descent into mediocrity.

But it would do Malaysia - and himself - a whole lot of good if he were to say it himself. He can laud the things we achieved under him; the record is undoubtedly a matter of pros and cons. If he thinks the sacrifices in integrity and regresses in democracy were worth the benefits of 'development', tell us why. That would be a better use of breath. The fuller the disclosure, the richer our reconciliation with the past.

So, will he? Can he? Will anyone else? Not likely - his shadow spreads a protective pall. In the company of illustrious M-men, it's up to Mahathir whether he wants to finish more like Mandela or Mugabe. So far he is choosing the latter.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news//81459>