

Taking stock of change
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Barely six weeks have passed, and the new possibilities exploded open by the political tsunami of March 8 are slowly playing out before our eyes. This must be a confusing time indeed for political commentators and the ordinary rakyat alike. MCPX

What people seldom realise is that any significant change in politics is bound to bring with it a great deal of uncertainties and risks. Most people do not like uncertainties, preferring to dwell in the comfort zone of the status quo. But change is forced upon us this time, whether we like it or not. So how should we deal with this rather radical change unfolding before us?

The change has been radical indeed.

Umno, the single-most dominant force in Malaysian politics for half a century, and the author of the nation's historical narrative, is now teetering on the verge of an abyss. Some of the leading lights within Umno can see the writings on the wall, and call for a reinvention of the Umno identity. A reinvented, rejuvenated and reengineered Umno is indeed the only way to go for this brand-name party.

Reform within Umno is also a prerequisite for a thorough make-over for the ruling BN coalition. Already, there are meek voices from the bowels of the BN juggernaut calling for the merging of all BN components into a single political party. The old alliance formed in the 1970s may have been very effective in solving the problems of post May 13 Malaysia, but you must question whether it is still relevant to meet the new realities of the 21st century.

Lame duck and lame ducks

This sort of drastic soul searching is easier said than done, especially for a complacent ruling class that has enjoyed undisputed power for half a century. In reality, the top leaders of the ruling parties are still in denial, while the finger pointing and the blame game from the ground are all directed at them. Finally, within Umno, the pressure is building for Pak Lah to hand over power to his deputy as soon as possible. For the first time in our nation's history, we have the grim prospect of a lame duck prime minister.

From a lame duck prime minister, we get a lame duck cabinet, and a lame duck government at the federal level. At first, we heard refreshing new voices from the new government, on bringing justice to the distinguished and respected judges who were removed in humiliating fashions in 1988. We heard tentative proposals to open up the media from a new information minister. We hear a new minister in charge of domestic trade and industry talking about removing price control. At first, it felt like the new dawn of a spring.

But these voices that would have been well-received by the people were soon drowned out by a cacophony of public discourses laden with mindless rhetoric aimed at internal power struggle among the ruling elite. The principle function of that noise pollution is to agitate for leadership change at the very top, especially in Umno and MCA.

Therefore, it looks as if there would be more of the same garbage discourse in the public sphere for the next 12 months or so right up to the party elections in Umno, MCA, and

probably Gerakan as well. The actors and players of these traditionally dominant political forces are so trapped in the catatonic trauma of their recent election debacle that, like a snake swallowing its own tail, they are tragically engrossed in slow but sure self-destruction.

In short, these powerful political institutions have become the victims of their very success. There are simply too many very entrenched interest groups, too many warlords, and too much spoil of war at stake within the ruling circle. They would resist any attempt from within their party to launch any kind of rebirth or renaissance, because any change would threaten their vested interests.

Can Umno, MCA or any BN component party be salvaged from the wreckage of the recent general election by a mere change of leadership at the very top? I doubt it. The problem with the BN now is certainly more than just a matter of party leadership, but their relevance in meeting rising and diversified expectations of the voters. Their old philosophy and old ways of doing things have been found to be wanting. Their old racist slogans sound tired and vacuous.

Right noises being made

In sharp contrast, the Pakatan Rakyat have been riding on the waves of their recent success.

True enough, the new state governments in Perak, Penang, Selangor, and Kedah seem to be fumbling along in their new role as administrators, instead of just criticising and protesting against the BN. You can feel their teething pain as they struggle to work out compromises in their new political reality. But obviously, everybody has taken a heavy dose of pragmatism.

But at least, these new state governments have made the right noises so far, and they have announced some extremely popular measures long awaited by the long suffering rakyat. Their attempt to bring transparency and good governance is a giant breath of fresh air in a country where corruption is running rampant at all levels of government.

So far, the new state governments have also shown that they are prepared to consult the rakyat on matters of administration and policy. They seem humble, willing to listen, and customer-friendly, and that is a huge change from the domineering arrogance of the previous BN state administrations.

The measure announced by the PAS Mentri Besar of Perak to give permanent land titles to 134 Chinese new villages is particularly gratifying to the Chinese community. It is a problem dogging the hundreds of new villages throughout the country for the last 60 years. This measure can bring so much benefit and good will to so many Malaysians of Chinese ethnic origin that the former MCA luminary Ting Chew Peh publicly declared that MCA should be ashamed for their 60 years of acquiescent failure.

With one fell swoop, the new Perak state government has made MCA irrelevant, and put paid to their lies that the party can represent Chinese interest in government. The pressure is now on all the other peninsular states to do likewise, thus bringing a new prosperous future to all the new villages which was a bastard product of the Emergency. A historical wound would have been healed, partly.

The most significant event since the general election is the triumphant return of Anwar Ibrahim to active politics on March 14. During the massive celebration estimated by some to number around 20,000 people, this de facto PKR leader introduced the new concept of Ketuanan Rakyat (People's Dominance) in sharp contrast to Umno ideology of Ketuanan Melayu (Malay Dominance). There is no fury like a tiger out of its cage!

Whether Anwar Ibrahim will persuade 30 BN MPs to cross the floor, and thereby facilitate the fall of the BN government in the Dewan Rakyat remains to be seen. He has promised the people of Sarawak and Sabah that the royalty for oil and gas for these two states will be increased from 5% to 20%. People from Peninsular Malaysia would not notice the significance of this offer, but for Sarawakians and Sabahans, this proposal is mighty enticing.

No limit

For now at least, the continuing loss of momentum on the part of BN is a gain for the Pakatan Rakyat. This new coalition formed after the 2008 general election is a new and unknown entity in Malaysia. So far, in those states where they have wrestled power away from the BN, people seem prepared to give them a grace period to prove themselves. The honeymoon should last three to six months.

There is one advantage of being so new for Pakatan Rakyat. There is no limit to what they can do to introduce and establish completely new democratic practices. With their benches swelling this time in the Dewan rakyat, they have the means to begin effective and novel parliamentary practices, like tabling private members bills, and influencing the various parliamentary committees. Why, we may even hope against hope that the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee would be a member of Pakatan Rakyat. That would be a breakthrough.

With BN denied their two-third majority, there would be occasions when the BN and the PR members have to work together, especially in the case of constitutional amendments that would benefit the country. The opposition in parliament would have to present a new image, and opposing for opposition's sake would not be accepted by the rakyat anymore. The opposition coalition must poise itself as the government-in-waiting, with a shadow cabinet, an alternative economic and nation-building programme, and so on.

The possibilities for the opening up of Malaysian democracy are limitless. Frankly, I am optimistic. The only snack is some opposition parties' penchant for self-destruction through internal strife. Let us wait and see.