

BN stuck in an old paradigm
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As the premier's fate dangles in the balance, it is obvious that he is out to do everything he can to save his skin.
MCPX

Where Abdullah Ahmad Badawi grinned through his first term, on the back of a handsome victory in the 11th general election, he is now grim, remorseful and overly-repentant. To describe him an embattled premier is a gross understatement.

Umno's rejection of Abdullah as party president is the writing on the wall, with the siege being led by the likes of former president Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Mohd Khir Toyo and Muhyiddin Yassin. The outcome is anybody's guess.

I'm not bothered whichever way the Umno fraternity decides. It is their democratic choice. I don't mind that they easily forget and even forgive their president. It doesn't really matter. No, not quite like that actually. You know it does matter, of course.

In a zero-sum-game called partisan politics, when someone's victory is your defeat and your success is your enemy's loss, very rarely do you see a win-win outcome. Whatever happens to others does have a direct or an indirect bearing on you, positively or otherwise.

I'm not saying whether or not the premier should resign, but only commenting on the exciting developments - which may turn out to be mere ranting again. Despite the calls for his resignation, the premier looks hell-bent not to accept all the blame.

najib abdullah 100408He had earlier initiated a witch-hunt to track down 'traitors' who had sabotaged the party's candidates in the general election campaign. After an aggressive start, he appears to have mellowed and the move seems to have fizzled out. Najib was the last one to make a strong statement in that direction. Abdullah was quick to realise that pressing on with that agenda would make him even more unpopular - Najib could have deliberately aided him for that reason.

Abdullah knows that reinventing Umno/BN and regaining lost ground hinges on bringing in positive reform, rather than merely deflecting the blame directed at him - a process that would be debilitating.

But provocation from Mahathir has tormented Abdullah. Mahathir is single-minded about wanting Abdullah out soonest. When his efforts to instigate Najib to take on Abdullah failed, Mahathir took pot-shots at Najib, calling him a coward. Najib has insisted that he is not a coward and that he only wants to see smooth transfer of power.

Promise of reform

Facing a growing chorus of dissent, Abdullah is embarking on more substantive reforms. In this, he has moved on from words and apologia in conceding mistakes and apologising to the people for the sufferings his policies have caused them. Now, he wants to show that he means business.

At the end of his speech at the Bar Council's recent 'Dinner for Justice', he was accorded a standing ovation. That must have been therapeutic for him, as he has been in dire need of a morale booster.

He announced measures towards judicial reform, a long-standing issue that could have saved BN in the elections - if he had the foresight. But he isn't known to be endowed with much of that.

judiciary forum lingam tape 171107 salleh abbas palace of justicThe proposals include setting up a Judicial Appointments Commission, paying ex-gratia to former Lord President Salleh Abas and five judges sacked in 1988, and review of the judiciary's terms and services. The pain and anguish that the judges and their families had to endure cannot be adequately compensated by ex-gratia payments. Everyone understands that.

It was a good attempt by Abdullah, but not good enough to atone for the sins of omission and commission perpetrated on the judges. He could have set the record straight through a commission of inquiry. Very regrettably, he didn't want to walk the extra mile.

His announcement on the four key initiatives to reform the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) similarly resonated well with many. I welcome this move as it is long overdue.

Ideally, a fresh Bill, not just a proposal for an amendment, should have been tabled in Parliament when the government launched the National Integrity Plan in April 2004. Unfortunately, one can't avoid the perception that he is doing it now to placate the people. It's better late than never, though it would have been wiser to be 'better never late'.

Turning the ACA into a Malaysian Commission on Anti-Corruption, with a Corruption Prevention Advisory Board in place, and rendering it accountable to (not just reporting to) a parliamentary committee on the prevention of corruption would really help the ACA regain public confidence. Reform of the judiciary and the ACA has far-reaching upsides on both domestic and foreign investors, and could improve the FDI and global competitiveness.

Mixed signals

Are Abdullah and his much-weakened team capable of delivering all these reforms? Judging by what happen to the pledge by the home minister to respect press freedom - and yet suspending Makkal Osai (before reinstating its permit on appeal), we are getting mixed signals.

The central issue is about access to information, which is critical and cardinal to the practice of democracy. In an electoral process, voters are expected to make informed decisions. Are they able access to information? With the Printing Presses and Publication Act and the Official Secrets Act, the answer is an emphatic 'No'!

malaysia parliament parlimenI will be submitting a motion to Parliament to press on with a Freedom of Information Act. Let's see how the premier and his BN law-makers handle that. Will it ever see the light of the day? God knows!

This nation, now built on a renewed hope and aspirations, is in urgent need of redemption. The Pakatan Rakyat now administers five states. If Umno/BN is not capable of redeeming themselves or of bringing in reform, there is hardly any other choice for the rakyat.

A gesture of goodwill to allow the two BN (Gerakan and Umno) leaders to join the Penang and Selangor Pakatan governments is a break-through strategy in enhancing the many dimensions of a `new politic`.

But the premier's flip-flop response was predictable and extremely lamentable. The BN is stuck in their old paradigm. Is Pakatan any better? Let us ensure that it is.

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