

Umno's arrogance can destroy BN
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For the first time in a long while now, the country cannot blame Anwar Ibrahim's machination for a regime change as the sole cause of political, social, and economic instability in Malaysia.

This time, Umno is the culprit.

The coup d'état within Umno, culminating in two emergency meetings of their supreme council in recent weeks, has virtually ended the political career of the Prime Minister and Umno president Abdullah Badawi. Fortunately for Malaysia, the forced change of leadership at the very top of Umno would occur without resort to the kind of social upheaval that erupted in 1969.

abdullah ahmad badawi umno 61 anniversary 110507 talkingUmno and their partners in the ruling coalition suffered greater losses at the polls in 2008, than they did in 1969. It became apparent immediately after the March 8 general election that Abdullah's position as the Umno president was no longer tenable.

In the realm of Realpolitik, whenever a political party suffers the humiliation of a massive electoral setback, heads must roll. And the biggest head must roll first. The Barisan Nasional was unceremoniously kicked out of government in five states and lost their two-third majority in Parliament. In the subsequent orgy of finger-pointing, it is natural for everyone to zero in onto the PM. The buck must stop there!

And so, the private agreement on handover of power between the PM and his deputy Najib Abdul Razak had been questioned and overturned by two successive meetings of the Umno supreme council. The PM is now expected to step down sooner than he expected, between October this year and March next year, instead of sometime in 2010. I cringe to watch him suffer his public humiliation, no matter how stoic he appears on TV.

Umno's arrogance at work

Here, we witness the traditional hegemonic arrogance of Umno at work.

In a vibrant democratic political party, the change of top leadership should be determined by the whole party at large, preferably through a fresh party election in a general assembly of delegates. Face or no face, a party president worth his salt should face the representatives of the party grassroots squarely, and abide by their verdict.

Instead, the current scheming for the PM's political demise has been plotted and executed entirely within the inner sanctum of the Umno supreme council, an eclectic collection of regional and factional warlords within the party, each coming to the negotiating table armed to the teeth with their support blocs as chips in this power casino.

The incident also illustrates how Umno has regarded the office of the prime minister as their birth right. This latest round of Machiavellian manoeuvring for the handover of power from the PM to the DPM has been conducted without any consultation with other component

parties of BN, as if these other parties were mere vestigial appendages of the main body which is Umno.

Commentators are mesmerised by the latest round of courtesan politics at work in Umno. Speculations are rife as to the unpredictable unfolding of events, and all eyes are now trained on the Umno division elections Oct 9, for there resides the real battlefield between the various factions for nomination to the top posts of the next supreme council. The picture is far from clear at this moment.

There is an obvious move to present Najib and Muhyiddin Yassin as a team for the top two Umno posts in the post-Abdullah era. But it is hard to tell, given that Umno politics is always far from transparent. With a power vacuum at the centre, power blocs will seek temporary alliances and there would be much talk of horse trading. Then again, Abdullah may not have to be written off at this juncture.

Even if Najib succeeds in taking over the presidency of Umno in the end, there is no guarantee that he will immediately become the prime minister of the country. This has been pointed out by our distinguished constitutional lawyer Tommy Thomas in an interview on the net portal, The Nut Graph. With the backdrop of Anwar's antic agitator our national consciousness to no end, Najib will have to demonstrate that he does command the respect of the majority of members of Parliament. The September 16 game begins again.

All these uncertainties must be very unsettling to the business community, at a time when the Wall Street market meltdown has plunged the global financial scene into chaos. This is a time when the country expects strong and enlightened leadership from the government. A beleaguered Umno caught in another round of power struggle is like a snake swallowing its own tail; it is not likely to inspire investors' confidence.

Relevance in jeopardy

Frankly, I doubt if the business community or the Malaysian society at large care two hoots whether Abdullah or Najib sits at the helm of government. For the large swathe of opposition supporters across the country, they represent the same ideology dictated by the half-century of Umno narrative.

But the acrimonious in-fighting in the current Umno crisis is also very telling for those who try to gaze into the crystal ball to gauge the future direction of Malaysian politics.

In the aftermath of the March 8 election debacle, there have been calls within Umno for party reforms, with a view towards reinventing the party identity in keeping with changing times. The relevance of the party in future Malaysian politics is in jeopardy. In fact, the continued viability of the concept of Barisan Nasional is at risk because of the arrogance and racial posturing of Umno.

Very recently, even Muhyiddin sounded the alarm that if Umno did not change, it might not survive the next election in 2013!

Unfortunately, recent events show that all they can think of in terms of reform was a change of their top leadership. Umno is very much stuck in a time capsule in which the Rule of Man always supersedes the Rule of Law. They mistakenly believe that by changing merely the personality at the top, they can change the party.

Perhaps they are still wallowing in the legacy of their former supreme mentor, the former Umno president Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Under his iron fist for 22 years, Umno did enjoy a monopoly of political narrative in Malaysia unseen before his time. Umno seems addicted to strongman politics, the sort that dominated developing nations after WW2 until very recently.

With the tectonic plates of warlord factions and vested interest groups grinding against one another in the bid for supremacy within Umno, who will heed the call for the real reform that Umno must indeed go through to survive in the future?

Who indeed will caution Umno that the secret to their electoral success in the past, the so-called Three M (money, media and machinery), can no longer guarantee victory at the poll in the new political scenario in Malaysia?

Who within Umno indeed will alert the party rank and file that the Malay ground in Peninsular Malaysia has shifted, and that the Malay community has grown very diversified. Unlike the 1960s, Umno seems to have lost touch with their Malay ground, the reality that ordinary Malays have to confront in their struggle for existence everyday in the face of high inflation and dwindling spending power.

In fact, after the March 8 polls, the Umno leadership has not shown in any concrete way how they are going to win back the support of their Malay constituency, either in the Malay heartland in rural Malaysia, or among the urbanised Malays who are growing increasingly alienated by Umno. They have no answer for PAS and PKR!

Why, they have even seemed to be blind to the crisis of confidence among their Barisan partners, the other component parties of the ruling coalition who begin to mumble about leaving BN altogether.

In short, in their post election trauma, the Umno leadership has chosen to turn inward, and pursue another round of internal crisis that infects Umno every 10 years or so.

True enough, Umno has always managed to survive their in-fighting in the past. It may have given Umno leaders and members the false belief in their supernatural ability to survive their internal contradiction forever. This current round of Umno crisis though, may just prove to be the last straw on the back of the Umno camel!

With Pakatan Rakyat snapping at their heel, Umno may perhaps prove to be a spent force after the 2013 general election. They will have nobody to blame but themselves.

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