

**Umno's exorcism**  
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**Stan Yee**

It seems fashionable to talk about change these days. In America 'change' is the election battle-cry of both the Democrat and Republican presidential hopefuls on their campaign trails.

Back here in Malaysia both the prime minister and deputy prime minister are telling the nation that the country's politics, a legacy of half-a-century of Umno-led BN rule, is due for drastic change.

And when it came, the first change appeared in the form of an early end to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's premiership.

It is a pity that BN had to be bludgeoned by the March 2008 general election to wake up to the realisation that change was necessary for it to remain relevant. Of course the prospect, however remote, of power loss to Pakatan Rakyat lends urgency to the need for reform.

While the suspense lasts, Anwar's threat of seizing power occupied much of media attention, and the daily snippets from cyberspace, the controlled media and wild rumours by SMSes further fuelled public speculation.

On their part, as much as the ruling elite have tried to make light of Anwar's claim of having the numbers to wrest power, there are signs of frantic crisis management in the governing camp.

Opinions differ, of course, as to where the BN's obvious decline would lead, or if the rot can be arrested and reversed. But if change is deemed imperative, it may not end with the incumbent prime minister's early exit.

The BN leadership must recognise the real problems and deal with them squarely and honestly even if that calls for a thorough internal cleansing to cut out the dead woods within its ranks.

More important, exorcise communalism, racism, religious bigotry and intolerance, corruption and arrogance, the debilitating system of political patronage, nepotism and cronyism that have spooked the country's body politic for close to half a century.

### **Out of denial**

As the ruling coalition the BN can initiate reforms if it is really serious about bringing change to Malaysia. And as the dominant party that calls the shots in BN, Umno is in a unique position to put things right if it can get out of the denial mode and be real.

What it has to do is nothing short of reinventing itself, starting from its basic social-political philosophy and the self image of Malay supremacy that it wishes to project to an increasingly cosmopolitan nation in the globalised world of the 21st century.

Most important of all, if Umno were to renew itself there should be an infusion of new blood

into its leadership structure. Hopefully that will reveal itself in the upcoming Umno election.

There are indications, however, that the old guards are digging in their heels as can be seen by a number of old faces in the candidacy bids for the party's leadership slots.

With Sapp out of BN and other component parties like MCA, Gerakan and Upko teetering on the verge and seemingly undecided about their continued link with BN under the present arrangement, Umno's crisis management team should address the disaffections within the BN ranks and do so urgently.

There is much a more progressive leadership can do to revamp the system, reset the tone and direction of a new Umno. That new Umno may come unto its own following the upcoming party election, or it may not. But the stakes are high for the future of BN.

To be positive, if BN survives the reappraisals by the component parties and there is change within Umno, a new era of mutually respectful multi-racial politics may ensue in this country.

With Umno playing a more positive leadership role, BN may have a new lease of life and be able to move away from race and religion and deal with the more important matters of bringing progress and prosperity to all Malaysians in this country. A future befitting a developed country - which we aspire to be.

There is a flipside to this of course: if they choose to stay, leaders of the component parties must change too. For a start they should stop behaving like appendages and start behaving like the honourable representatives of their constituents.

The subservient behaviour that typified their relationship with Umno leaders in the past must give way to one of mutual respect and businesslike dealings, and they must remind themselves often that it is not favour from Umno leaders that keep them where they are but the people who voted them in.

They must learn to relate to Umno leaders with integrity and dignity and with firmness and resolve, and not to scurry away muttering effusive apologies at the slightest sign of displeasure on the part of the PM and other Malay leaders.

### **More than buildings**

There is much to do to develop this country. Development is a lot more than just fancy buildings and infrastructure in and around Kuala Lumpur and state capitals.

These are the hardware that hits the eyes, but the software of qualitative human development through progressive education and social interactions unfettered by excessive race and religious considerations are just as important to qualify Malaysia as a developed country.

Then of course there is the means of livelihood that sustains life and makes for comfortable living for the people through the length and breadth of the country. Securing that must remain the primary aim of politics.

Let's hope Malaysia's body politic is equal to the tasks. One of the post-election realities is the emergence of Pakatan Rakyat as an alternative to BN, the erstwhile political monolith

that ruled  
Malaysia.

There is now a real chance of a two-party system to provide check and balance to governance, thus making the ballot box more meaningful as a safeguard for accountability and an antidote against power abuse.

If 'change' is anything worth hoping for in this country it should be one that embraces these safeguards and not one that brings back a power monolith in whatever form.

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