

Moving away from race-based politics
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Baradan Kuppusamy

Ever since voters rose to give the race-based Barisan Nasional coalition government its biggest ever drubbing in March the search has been on for a new political formula for a country divided over race and religion.

On the opposition side is a loose and unstable Pakatan Rakyat coalition of three disparate parties - the multi-racial but Malay led PKR, Chinese-based, secular DAP and the Islamist PAS.

Their ability to capture state power and rule the country has come into question after PAS insisted it will not co-operate unless Islam gets pre-eminence, a move opposed by the Chinese party.

In addition PKR, led by parliamentary Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim, is focused on engineering defections from the government side to seize power. It had set several deadlines but has never met them.

On the ruling side is the BN, a coalition of 13 political parties, several of them identified exclusively with one race, that had successfully ruled the country for 51 years and brought far sighted development.

Indigenous Muslim-Malays make up 60 percent of Malaysia's 27 million people and benefit from positive discrimination policies. Ethnic Chinese who account for 25 percent of the population and Indians who form another eight percent are descendants of immigrants.

But because of the long years in uninterrupted power the BN and its constituents grew corrupt, arrogant and authoritarian and ended up alienated from the voters who punished them severely in the March 8 general election.

The opposition won five states and 82 seats in the 222-seat parliament. The BN with its 140 seats is ruling but is shaky and constantly fears defections leading to political uncertainties in the midst of global financial and economic turmoil whose contagion effect is dreaded by Malaysians.

The painful memories of the 1997 Asian financial crisis is still fresh among Malaysians as the political turmoil expands as student leaders, public intellectuals and experts argue how best to meet the political demands of a new era.

"Everybody is talking reforms but nobody is sure yet what reforms, who and how and when," public intellectual Eddin Khoo told IPS.

"But it is good that there is extensive open debate and that most Malaysians reject the old race based politics," Khoo said. "It is refreshing that most Malaysians want to move ahead with a secular political system based on common shared values."

"They also clearly rejected the domination of any one race over others," he said adding the country needs work on and achieve a new pattern for shared competition minus race, religion, dominance and political violence.

The worry however is that tension is rising as the opposition tries to seize power and the ruling entrenched forces react to defend by whatever means the status quo it had so long enjoyed.

It is in this climate of heightened fear that economic turmoil is visiting the country.

Direct membership

The man who presided over a disenchanted country since 2004 - Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi - has little to show for those years by way of reform of a corrupt dysfunctional system and announced last month that he would quit and hand over power to his deputy Najib Abdul Razak.

As he prepares to leave, Abdullah admitted rising race and religious tensions were his chief worries and he promises that in the five months now left to him he would tackle the race divide before leaving.

Few believe in his abilities but on October, Abdullah dropped a bombshell that won accolades and sparked some controversy with his proposal to allow the BN to accept direct individual membership, irrespective of race or religion.

"A multi-racial membership would not only make Barisan more inclusive but could be a good beginning to reform itself," Abdullah told local reporters. "We need to change, to reform to be acceptable by the new generation."

Abdullah wanted his successor Najib to focus on national unity because the level of "inter-racial and inter-religious relations" was low. "We need to get back to basics and understand that Malaysia is stronger for the mix of different races and communities that we have," he told Bernama, the official news agency. "We need to tackle these issues head-on, with honesty and understanding. After more than 50 years of independence, these issues still remain with us," Abdullah said. Currently the BN only accepts political parties as members and thus with direct individual membership it opens new and exciting prospects for ordinary people.

Although BN component political parties have said that the best way forward is for all components to dissolve and turn the Barisan into a single multi-racial political party, Abdullah's proposal has many supporters.

The idea is to reform in stages so as not to upset entrenched forces who fear a single multi-racial party would dilute their personal standing and erode the power of Umno. Political experts see the proposal by Abdullah as one method to offer a direct multi-racial platform to the people when they go to the polls again probably in 2011.

"It is a giant step forward," said senior minister Ng Yen Yen who is in charge of family and community development. "This is a way forward for the country to move away from race-based politics to a political landscape that ensures good governance, vibrant economy and trust in the judiciary." "It would make the Barisan into a more inclusive party and an important step in the reform process," she said adding it would be a major structural change but the move needs careful study.

"It is time for us to do away with race-based politics. The BN must take the lead to

dismantle race-based policies and form a single BN party with direct membership of all races," said commentator Chris Anthony writing in The Star daily last week.

He urged Umno to take the lead to make the change.

"It is time for our leaders to come out of the state of denial and face the hard realities that exist in our midst. More and more Malaysians are saying no to the race politics of the past which they realise is obsolete," he said.

"They want to live side by side in peace and harmony and whichever party that comes to power must appreciate this change in the mindset of the people and adopt a more just and fair system for all or risk becoming obsolete themselves," he added.

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