

Finally, we have lost track of Vision 2020

Malaysiakini.com

Mar 27, 09

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Now, on the eve of a new administration, it is time to buck the trend. Let us not dwell too much on opportunities missed but rather the continuities and discontinuities that have shaped the Abdullah administration. This process of looking back is necessary if we are to face the challenge of change as a nation and a people.

Any attempt to divorce the last five years with the preceding 22 years or the last 45 is clearly illusory. The BN did not just lose public support because of a transition in leadership or even the lacklustre performance of the last cabinet. After all, many in the Mahathir cabinet continued to serve in the Abdullah cabinet; and surely some of them will continue in the coming cabinet. This is continuity that very often guarantees political stability.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad benefitted when many of the policies laid down by his predecessor, Hussein Onn, began to bear fruits in the early 1980s. It was after all under Hussein that NEP targets were well met. Sometimes, leaders are lucky because what they have in mind meet with the spirit of the times.

Mahathir's own brand of Malaysian Incorporated, for example, was possible because of the worldwide adulation of liberal capitalism. Privatisation, 'Look East', mega-projects; all were initiated by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan in the West. If one cares

to read Margaret Thatcher's autobiography, she considers Mahathir a kindred spirit. 'Made him host CHOGM and he never looked back', in reference to Mahathir's decision to abandon the 'Buy British Last' policy.

Similarly, the so-called 'open space' and liberalising of the Malaysian public sphere was not Abdullah's doing alone. The Multimedia Act was pushed through by Mahathir. All of us, these leaders included, were overwhelmed by the Internet revolution. It was impossible to control the Net without seeming to align oneself with repressive regimes like Myanmar or China.

As such, we all hoped that the middle class, with their preoccupation with material pursuits, would take to the Net peacefully. To a certain extent, this is quite correct and most of the blogs are quite harmless. Blogsphere has a way of neutralising heated or unwarranted comments. Read the comments section here for evidence of a moderating effect of open dialogue.

But the Abdullah cabinet did not handle cyber-discussions as well as Mahathir might have hoped. Too many ministers were out of touch with technology. They were not used to being challenged intellectually and many just shut out the digital world. But Mahathir has proven that age is no barrier.

To be fair, in the early days, Hishamuddin Hussien actually answered questions and handled himself pretty well. But at some point, he changed his mind and the collective decision to treat the Net as not serious was a mistake that cascaded into a terrible missed opportunity for dialogue with the middle class.

The second discontinuity in policy has to do with educational reform. In the last five years, we should have designed a new educational policy to prepare Malaysia for the post-industrial age. Manufacturing will still be prominent but not beyond the next decade. We will soon be a net importer of petroleum, so the cushion that has afforded us a comfort zone on education is quickly running out of air.

At first, there seemed to be a paradigm shift. Abdullah promised a new way of thinking. We were to invest in the 'software'. Here, Mahathir already showed the way - the teaching of maths and science in English and by asserting the importance of meritocracy in academia. Both these doors, so well-guarded by conservative 'educationists' of all stripes, were left flying in the wind.

Abdullah could have introduced radical policies to create a single education system based upon meritocracy especially after his landslide victory in 2004. Today, the issue is not what will happen in the next year as the world economy degenerates further, but what will the new economic landscape be like? Will we have the right workforce to help transition into a post- industrial economy?

Instead, we are stuck because of political grandstanding over education. Without the best people teaching our students, all ethnic groups are losers. We are also losing talent to countries like Singapore, Australia, the US and Britain. Factories will eventually re-locate to China, India and Vietnam.

Our local talent base is too small to attract investments in higher quality work, yet we have an antiquated education policy that does not fit the needs of nation or national economy. We restrict the flow of foreign talent thus making sure our local manufacturing companies cannot move up the value chain. It seems that we have screwed up badly here.

The biggest departure from the Mahathir regime involves the reforms that Abdullah said he would implement to improve the civil service, the judiciary and the police. The government's very own royal commission recommended that we establish a tribunal to monitor the police force. For too long, the executive have relied on the police and the courts to keep them in power.

All three parties have forgotten that they have alienated Malaysians in the process. Now, we have government establishments that do not inspire confidence. It remains to be seen if we need a regime change to implement these much needed reforms.

Finally, we have lost track of Vision 2020. The BN had a great opportunity during the 50th Merdeka celebrations. What could have been a great celebration of nation or bangsa was allowed to be hijacked by ethnic nationalism. Now, we are a nation divided by political rhetoric. Political awareness has increased but so has disaffection for politicians.

Recently, Mahathir claimed that Malays are being insulted, their rights challenged and their institutions rubbish-ed. Abdullah believes that he has been too liberal and this gave rise to all these challenges. The reality is quite different. Gone was the spirit of give and take that characterised the first two decades of Malaysia as a nation. Under Mahathir and Abdullah, Umno became paramount. It is still throwing its weight around. The courts felt it in 1988, the Malay sultans in 1993, the rest of us between 2004 and today.

It is sad that Umno and the BN have voluntarily abandoned the middle ground. Abdullah did not manage to move the nation forward toward 'Bangsa Malaysia', an objective the BN set for itself.

It remains to be seen if the next cabinet led by Najib Razak will be able to unite the country, initiate much needed reform in the Malaysian educational policy based on practical aims rather than ethnic ones; and chart a future path for the nation beyond 2020.

All Malaysians must realise that we are living in a much more difficult times involving a world economy in shambles and a fractured political landscape; Umno especially must realise that the fight is no longer for the survival of the Malays alone. The future for Malaysia is bleak indeed.