

Comment by Kevin Tan

FROM Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's criticisms of the current administration, it does not take a rocket scientist to conclude that Umno is heading into another period of internal strife.

These are early signs of political manoeuvring as Umno will be holding elections next year. No prize for guessing which two political giants and their allies will be battling for supremacy this time.

Like the concept of the business cycle in economics, there appears to be a 10-year cycle in Malaysian politics. During this cycle, there is a sustained period of economic growth and political stability to be followed by a period of economic decline that will climax with a major power struggle in Umno before the economy recovers again.

After a recession in the mid-80s, Mahathir sealed his reign over Umno by winning a bitterly-fought party election in 1987. However, it also resulted in a split within the party, which led to the formation of Parti Semangat 46 by Mahathir's challenger, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Almost 10 years later, Malaysia had another economic crisis that led to the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. This brought about another split within Umno which gave birth to the *reformasi* movement and Parti Keadilan.

In a way, the economy is a leading indicator for Malaysian politics. While the current economic outlook is not all gloomy, many Malaysians are feeling the pinch of inflation and higher cost of living due to the increased oil price and the recent electricity tariff hike.

The opposition has played up these issues with some demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur. Yet, these are just tremors in Malaysian politics.

The political earthquakes only come when elites within the ruling party, especially the top leaders in Umno, fight among themselves, and this is what determines Malaysia's future.

A declining economy exacerbates political rivalry as different factions within the ruling party have to fight harder for limited resources to maintain themselves and their supporters in power. The maxim "one faction's gain is

The 10-year cycle of Malaysian politics

another's loss" is more pronounced during an economic downturn.

This is why there is tremendous attention on Umno's party elections next year. While a power struggle is a foregone conclusion, what is more important is the fallout from this factional war.

The real magnitude of any political earthquake is its aftershock.

If, for any reason, the losing faction gets enough support within Umno and finds it compelling to split away from the party, it constitutes a major political earthquake, of say, at least 7.0 on a political Richter scale.

Another important question to ask is what lies ahead for Malaysia in the aftermath of this power struggle?

If the losing faction keeps its head down, there will be nothing more than a minor earthquake. Chances are whoever controls Umno then will lead the BN to a resounding victory during the general election due in 2009.

If indeed Umno splits again and disenfranchises itself from the Malay community at large, the way it did in 1999, the answer will then depend on the

opposition. In this situation, they will get another shot at breaking BN's two-third majority in Parliament as long as they can get their act together. If they can sway both the Chinese and Malay grounds simultaneously, BN will be in trouble.

By examining history, we see that splits within Umno had generally benefited the opposition. In 1990, DAP was the biggest winner. Despite its cooperation with Semangat 46, the Malay ground was still staunchly behind Umno. As a result, the opposition was still weak as Semangat 46 and PAS only achieved mediocre results.

In 1999, there was a united opposition front called Barisan Alternatif. However, it was PAS that gained the most from the Malays' disenchantment with Umno primarily because the Malays were angered by the sacking of Anwar. However, the

Chinese ground, wary of PAS' Islamic orientation, did not throw more support behind DAP. As such, they failed to break through the mighty BN fortress.

Looking at the current political configuration within Umno, however, it is hard to find any elements in the party that can create the same magnitude of political earthquake as those in 1987 and 1998.

It is likely that those defeated next year will either keep their heads down or realign themselves to the victors instead of risking being cut off from Umno's resources and patronage network.

That said, some analysts believe that what at this stage appears to be no more than a potential minor earthquake may turn into a political tsunami if the Anwar factor is brought into the equation. But that could well be nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of Anwar supporters hoping to benefit from the growing schisms within Umno.

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