

# Ready to throw in the towel?

NST - 26/8/2007

## COMMENT

By Fui Soong

COFFEE with a friend recently turned into a tirade, trailing long into the night, about how things are not what they used to be in Malaysia.

Just two days earlier, a very senior retired civil servant had also asked me why his Chinese friends rap him whenever he is vocal about his views on Malaysia.

Perhaps a perspective on Chinese Malaysian thinking may ease some of the political anxieties swirling around since the release of the Merdeka Centre survey.

Every community has its share of living paradoxes, and running a campaign as a multiracial coalition during the general election is far from easy.

In order to convince Chinese voters, component parties like MCA and Gerakan will tell you there is nothing like winning the hearts and minds of the community. They will also tell you that the Chinese heart is emotional but the mind is hard to read.

The community is misunderstood for its reserved demeanour, yet has a fiercely individualistic mindset.

Chinese are taught from young to believe in a performance-based culture. They are highly critical of things not delivered to their satisfaction.

The exception is with their teachers and family elders, who must be everlastingly revered (another paradox). Politicians are clearly not on that list.

Chinese willingly pay crazy prices for what they deem to be good food, but will spread the news about restaurants serving bad food. In politics, expectations are similarly raised to a point where it's no surprise an elected representative almost feels as if he is the fish served on a dish to be judged!

What is going on in the Chinese mind right now, that will decide the vote? Or does the heart drive the



The first cabinet meeting in 1957. Tun Tan Siew Sin is standing, second from right. After he stepped down as minister of finance in 1974, no MCA leader has held that post.

mind instead? If it's the heart, then is it anger? Humiliation? The lack of political voice to effect changes? Issues of empowerment?

Is their individualistic and independent manner actually jeopardising their ability to co-operate, thus reducing the Chinese political power base? Is that the problem in resolving community issues? And is the opposition also exploiting this situation?

Not long ago, an analyst pointed out the "small guy" tactic. It is not about their ability to resolve issues or even their credibility. The ruling coalition is often puzzled by why people can still be moved by the opposition parties, despite their limited resources. But the small-guy battle has always been fought very simply — by playing on emotions.

These may well be of anger, feelings of inadequacy, fear or unfairness, but what the opposition is doing is capturing the right "winds of change" — and very effectively.

With the current sentiment, how would the community benefit from

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"teaching the government a lesson", as we heard in the last by-election? Some observe that the last time the Chinese community felt so emotionally pent up was in 1969, when the Barisan Nasional lost Penang to DAP and only narrowly won Selangor.

Emotions among the Malays then were focused on the recent separation of Singapore, the Tunku's administration, the position of the Malay language and Malay education.

The Chinese, meanwhile, were

feeling that their language was under threat and were unhappy with Malay privileges. The resulting challenge turned ugly, culminating in the post-election riots that year. MCA then won only 13 of 33 seats (39.4 per cent). In 2004, they won 31 seats out of 40 (77.5 per cent).

In 1974, then-MCA president Tun Tan Siew Sin stepped down as minister of finance and, subsequently, the party had to give up its trade portfolio. MCA never regained the opportunity to sit in either cabinet position

until today, a real blow to the business-oriented Chinese community.

Considering Datuk M. Kayveas' current predicament in attempting to recoup the four parliamentary seats and 12 state seats the People's Progressive Party held in 1972 or, more recently, the replacement of Kuching's Chinese mayor, perhaps nowhere in the world is political communal bargaining more hard and fast than in Malaysia. Component parties are simply apportioned political power according to what they can bring to the table.

Someone once asked why the MCA doesn't just stop being a race-based party to force BN to move away from communal politicking. I believe many Malaysians wish we could move away from racial politics. Unfortunately, this is too premature. In a snap, another Chinese group would happily replace MCA.

For better or for worse, this is the reality in Malaysia. Ask any Parti Keadilan Rakyat member and they will admit to you (quietly) that there will always be a Malay leader within PKR. Likewise, DAP will never be able to form a government without the help of the majority race, be it Umno or Pas.

Are we ready to throw in the towel? Pause. Think. Our prime minister's current approval rating among the Malays is one which any country leader in the entire democratic world would envy.

Therefore, is the Chinese community presently voting with their hearts or with their minds? At what cost are we willing to cast our lot? If we intend to change the course of our country for the better, we need to work more strategically, together rather than apart.

I think it's something to do with sticks bunched together not being able to break easily. Perhaps another deeply philosophical battle tactic might fit better: *Bu Yi Yu Li* — spare no effort to do your level best.

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