

Political crises big and small

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MALAYSIA is no stranger to internal crisis, and in the last 50 years there have been many. Some were too small to be noticed. But there were a few that very nearly got out of hand and even threatened to bring down the nation so much so that many have observed that the country's history is nothing more than the transition from one crisis to another.

But this is no different from the history of other new nations, and the fact that Malaysia is not only still here but progressing, prospering and developing as well, is a credit to the capabilities of those who govern the country.

The governors were aware of what the doomsayers of half a century ago said about the fledgling nation not surviving beyond its childhood in view of poor communal relations and mutual suspicions among the various races then.

In fact, communal feelings ran high just a year before Aug 31, 1957 as the country's communal and political party leaders debated what should and should not go into the national constitution.

There was a crisis of sorts when the ruling Alliance of Umno, MCA and MIC discussed seat allocation for the 1959 general election. MCA asked for more but did not get them. This led to a crisis in the MCA and its president, Lim Chong Eu (now Tun), resigned.

During the brief period that Singapore was part of Malaysia, the PAP tried to edge out the MCA as an Alliance partner but a crisis was averted after Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman said that Umno would "sink and swim" with its oldest partner.

But PAP's departure in 1965, following Singapore's separation from Malaysia, did not lessen communal feelings especially between the Malays and the Chinese, particularly over the national language issue, the status of Chinese schools, and Malay rights.

The debate over these issues led to the worst communal crisis in the country - and blood was shed. Today, the May 13, 1969 incident serves as a warning as well as a reminder that discussion about issues sensitive to the various races and ethnic groups should be tempered with care and understanding.

While political parties within the Barisan Nasional (BN) have had their own crises, often it is those in Umno that have overflowed into the national arena and threatened national stability. As the dominant party in the ruling coalition, any crisis within Umno casts a long shadow on national affairs.

After Tun Abdul Razak Hussein took over the country's leadership, he attempted to change Umno's power structure to strengthen it. He nudged many old vested interests from their moorings and they began to gang up against him.

But he died suddenly, leaving - what many people thought - the politically naive Tun Hussein Onn to continue his mission. One major challenge came from popular power baron and Malay leader Datuk Harun Idris, the former Selangor Menteri Besar.

Hussein, backed by influential Razak-recruited ministers like Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Tun Ghazali Shafie and Tun Mahathir Mohamad, faced down the near rebellion and by the 1978 general election, was in total control of Umno and the country.



When Lee San Choon took over as MCA leader in 1974, he tried to do to his party what Razak did in Umno. He tried to unite the Chinese by trying to get the support of the thousands of clan associations and merchant guilds - which had hitherto been suspicious of the MCA - with such slogans as "no national unity without Chinese unity".

The associations and guilds were unimpressed but Lee's position was unassailable in the party and it grew in strength. The party set up a number of institutions to help the Chinese as a reaction to the New Economic Policy (implemented as a result of May 13, 1969) which many MCA members saw as a means to help the bumiputras.

Under Lee's presidency many young leaders rose to positions of power and influence in the party. And when he resigned suddenly in 1983, these leaders saw their opportunity to rise still further and to possibly grab power. The result was the worst crisis the party had ever experienced.

It became a national crisis as the speeches made by members of the contending factions headed by acting president Datuk Dr Neo Yee Pan and challenger Tan Koon Swan annoyed the other communities in the country.

Also, the party took its dispute to court and in the ensuing legal battle which was widely reported in the national media, much dirty linen was exposed. It took about a year before everything was resolved - just in time for the 1986 general election.

The rise of Dr M

THE selection of Mahathir, Malaysia's inveterate politician, by Hussein Onn as his deputy in 1976 triggered off a small political crisis within Umno.

When he became prime minister and acting Umno president following Abdul Razak's death, the meticulous Hussein took two months to decide on a deputy.

There was even speculation that he was going to choose Home Minister Ghazali Shafie, until he was confronted by vice-presidents Abdul Ghafar Baba (later Tun), Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Mahathir, that he had to choose one of them.

When he chose education minister Mahathir - the most junior vice-president - Ghafar and his supporters were disappointed and angry. The grassroots politician felt rebuffed and resigned from his government posts. Tengku Razaleigh meanwhile indicated his support.

When Hussein announced that he was stepping down as prime minister in 1981 because of poor health,

many thought Mahathir would support the prince from Kelantan, who was finance minister, to be his deputy but instead, he supported education minister Datuk Musa Hitam (now Tun).

Musa was elected Umno deputy president in the 1981 party polls and became deputy prime minister. He won again against Tengku Razaleigh three years later, again with Mahathir's endorsement.

Tengku Razaleigh was a bitter man. He had far greater support in the party than Musa and had Mahathir remained neutral, he would have won. And that laid the ground for future problems in the party which later led to it even being declared illegal.

Mahathir had inherited an almost united party from Hussein but in attempting to consolidate his leadership he annoyed a number of old guards with his combative approach. Discontentment began to take root in the party especially after the national economy began to contract by the end of 1984.

This troubled Mahathir, not so much because he could not handle the challenges to his authority in the party, but more because they bogged him down and made him less able to concentrate on his role as the country's prime minister.

"Democracy without a strong party is meaningless," he said, often indicating his preference for a strong party united behind him.

It was thus around this time that he began to think of ways to make Umno strong and united, thereby leaving him free to concentrate on the national agenda especially national unity and nation building.

Some of his thoughts on this he put together in a book called *The Challenge*, parts of which seem like an updated *The Malay Dilemma*, his first and controversial book.

He said many newly-independent countries, because they could not handle the problems of disunity, had split into two or descended into chaos and subsequently into dictatorship as, after all, democracy was not a well-known system of government in the region.

Towards the end of the book he said: "Will Malaysia, too follow this trend? Will a democratic government prove too weak to overcome the problems mentioned above, and will it be replaced by a dictatorship?"

It is against this background that

Mahathir rose to become a real dominant force by the 1990 general election after having vanquished such rival centres of power as the Rulers, his enemies in Umno and the judiciary.

Mahathir's two moves against the rulers, one in 1984 and the other a few years later, was aimed at making their powers more clearly defined. These moves, described as "constitutional crises", did not end in complete victory for Mahathir but they made the Rulers more predictable.

Umno declared illegal

DEPUTY Prime Minister Musa Hitam felt quite uncomfortable in the government and the party with the rise of new Mahathir acolytes such as Daim Zainuddin (later Tun), Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid (later Tan Sri).

Furthermore, Tengku Razaleigh, whom he had defeated twice, was still in the cabinet and despite Musa's plea, Mahathir refused to remove the trade and industry minister.

It caused a small political crisis when Musa challenged

challenge that was being mounted against him for the party leadership.

In April 1987, Team A led by Mahathir and Ghafar faced off a challenge by Team B led by Tengku Razaleigh and his unlikely running mate, Musa.

Mahathir won narrowly, and he took his revenge by purging the party of Team B members and their supporters. The party was divided right down the centre.

If the observation that Mahathir thrived on crisis and grew stronger because of them are true, then in 1987 he must have become really strong.

As if the party being truly divided into two was not enough, in June, some members filed a suit in the High Court to declare null and void the recent party elections because of irregularities in some party divisions.

And then in October, the country was threatened by the possibility of a repeat of May 13. But this was averted when mass arrests of over one hundred people were made, under what came to be known as *Operasi Lalang*, of those involved in fanning racial sentiments.

Of the number of factors that led to the situation, two stand out. One was the collapse of the MCA's deposit-taking cooperatives affecting thousands of depositors, and the government's reluctance to bail

Anwar expelled

Unanimous decision by Umno supreme council

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 11 - The Umno supreme council has decided unanimously today to expel deputy party president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, after giving him the opportunity to defend himself against various allegations.



them out even though it had bailed out Bank Bumiputra, Bank Bumiputra Finance and Perwira Habib Bank earlier.

MCA leaders were desperate and some, including deputy president Datuk Lee Kim Sai, had no choice but to come out with a statement to say that if help was not forthcoming, MCA would leave the BN.

Umno Youth acting head Datuk Seri Najib Razak responded that Umno was reviewing MCA's position in the BN even before the party could quit the coalition.

Tension further escalated when



Tun Salleh Abas



Anwar Ibrahim

the government posted non-Chinese-educated headmasters and senior assistants to national type primary schools despite opposition from the Chinese community.

A number of people have opined and suggested that the racial tension of 1987 could have been easily avoided but it was allowed to escalate so that Mahathir's position in Umno could strengthen through being seen as a leader of the hour.

Otherwise, they said, why, when tension was already running high over the government's reluctance to help the Chinese cooperatives, was it allowed to increase further by the posting of non-Chinese educated teachers to Chinese schools.

Similar suggestions were made about Mahathir when he decided to register a new Umno after the party was declared illegal by the High Court in February 1988.

They said there were avenues opened to him to make the party legal again. It seemed, however, there was an unwillingness to revive the old party. In fact, even former Lord President Tun Salleh Abas attested to it.

But reviving the old party would not have given Mahathir the chance to create a new Umno "in his own image" - an Umno that would be without the baggage of the past and leaders of the past, and a party that would make it difficult for members to challenge the incumbent president. In other words, a party beholden to him.

And that was what eventually happened.

Dismayed that Umno was declared illegal, those who filed the case to have the 1987 elections declared null and void because of the existence of illegal branches, filed an appeal to have only those branches declared illegal and for fresh elections to be held.

Salleh set June 13, 1988 as the date for the case and stipulated that all nine judges of the Supreme court would preside. Because of the full panel, there was the chance that the court would allow the appeal.

However, Salleh was summoned by Mahathir and suspended. Acting Lord President Tun Hamid Omar then postponed the case to August. Following this, five other supreme court judges were suspended.

On Aug 8, 1988, the Umno case was heard by the three remaining supreme court judges and two High Court judges nominated by the acting Lord President. The case was dismissed, ending Umno's legal battle.

Salleh was an independent-minded Lord President just as his predecessors had been. Some of his remarks were also seen as critical of the government.

It was this, and also his decision regarding the Umno case, that led to his suspension, trial and subsequent dismissal. The episode was also meant to send a strong signal to the judges.

Mahathir's dominance over the country's affairs was complete. In the 1990 general election, the BN captured 117 of the 142 parliamentary seats, an undisputed landslide.

vulnerable and this led his new and young deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, to challenge him.

Ever since the Umno rising star challenged Ghafar for the number two position in the party and forced him to resign, Mahathir had been wary of his one-time protege.

There were even rumours of a plot to topple Mahathir and replace him with Anwar after the prime minister decided to reject the IMF prescriptions for economic recovery and to do it Malaysia's way.

The general wisdom at the time was that accepting IMF's regime would quickly put the country on a recovery mode instead of being mired in uncertainty.

Mahathir's reaction was swift and ruthless. Anwar was sacked, arrested, tried on several charges, found guilty of most of them and imprisoned.

The wily politician had calculated the risks and foresaw that he would have to weather the storm of national and international protests over his treatment of his nationally and internationally popular deputy.

The general election was just around the corner and he knew the BN would suffer. He took the risks. As he expected, the BN suffered a massive loss of support in the 1999 general election even though the coalition retained the psychological two-thirds majority of the seats in Parliament.

But immediately after the polls Mahathir went about repairing the economy, restoring Umno unity, sprucing up the image of the BN and that of himself. He began to appear as the father and saviour of the nation.

Indeed a year before Mahathir stepped down, he resolved the MCA crisis - the first big one since Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik took over the leadership in 1984 - after he came out with a formula that reunited the party and saw the departure of warring president Ling and his deputy, Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek. Ling became a Tun and Lim became a Tan Sri.

Trouble brewed in the MIC, too, but it was a recurring drama ever since Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu snatched the leadership from Datuk Seri S. Subramaniam.

Samy became president in 1979 and Subramaniam his deputy in an uneasy relationship ever since.

Two years after Mahathir stepped down, Subramaniam was finally defeated by a Samy nominee, Datuk G. Palanivel. Unlike other BN parties which suffered all sorts of crises, including those which collapsed and disappeared completely, the MIC remained whole under its dominant president.

In his last years Mahathir dominated the country completely seemingly with the tacit consent of the whole nation as he went about putting the country's economy back on track. And by the time he stepped down in October 2003, he was a popular leader with few remembering the many constraining mechanisms he had put in place to facilitate his autocratic rule.

In Umno, too many seemed to have forgotten that changes to the party constitution that he put in place favoured incumbency.

These, of course, need to be dismantled. But most people only remember that Mahathir handed to his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a united country with a sound economy, a united and strong Umno and a strong BN. It was his legacy.

The 1997/1998 crisis

THE Economic crisis of 1997 brought about a situation that made Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad looked