

# Race politics to the fore

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by **Pauline Puah**

**IF** the general election is called in 2007 – many are saying that it would even though the government mandate does not run out till early 2009 – how would the political parties fare?

The answer is obvious and does not require much gazing at tea leaves.

Hardly anyone is disputing that the Barisan Nasional is going to win again but it is unlikely to win the number of seats it won in 2004 – 199 out of 219.

Umno, with 110 seats, is still the dominant party in the BN coalition. It may lose a few but not to the extent of weakening its dominant position in the coalition.

Many have argued that the *keris*-brandishing and chest-thumping at the recent Umno assembly was to demonstrate to the Malay masses that the party is in command and remains their protector against the demands of those outside their community.

A much-quoted example of the challenge the community faces is the

case of the nine non-Muslim cabinet ministers

submitting on Jan 19 a joint memorandum to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi calling for a review of laws that affect the rights of non-Muslims.

History has shown also that whenever there is a crisis in Umno, there would be some who would use the racial and religious cards to promote their causes and the causes of the party.

In August and at the height of the spat between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and former premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, deputy Umno Youth chief and the prime minister's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin irked his colleagues in the coalition parties when he said non-Malays would take advantage when the Malays are disunited and weak.

He also made another remark, that the Malays in Penang had been marginalised. He refused to apologise even when his statement had caused an uproar and was heavily criticised in the MCA and Gerakan annual assemblies in August.

Be that as it may, many think that Mahathir's scathing attacks on the prime minister, his family and his administration have caused rifts in Umno and put Abdullah in a very defensive position.

But Umno, with its succession plan in place and its appeal to the Malay masses maybe only a little diminished, is still generally seen as a strong party.

So is MCA, Umno's oldest partner, under its young leaders and led by Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting as president and Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy as his deputy.

It won 31 parliamentary seats not only because the DAP, which also claims to champion Chinese causes, was seen as cooperating with PAS but also because the MCA was able to resolve many of the issues facing the community.

So was the case with Gerakan, which also generally champions Chinese causes and which won 10 parliamentary seats out of the 12 it contested. The party is strong and stable with its succession plan in place.

The question that is being asked is whether the MCA and Gerakan have managed to retain their appeal to the electorate just as Umno has retained its influence over its members and supporters.

Can they satisfactorily explain to their members and supporters the recent controversies over such issues as the extension of the New Economic Policy, the position of Islam and the anti-Chinese stances of some Umno speakers at the recent Umno general assembly?

There is no mistaking the anxiety and feelings of concern among leaders of these two parties. Some feel that Umno, as a senior partner and leader of the coalition, has not only not helped them but has let them down.

MIC is a strong party led by a strong leader, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, and had recently elected a new deputy, Datuk G. Palanivel, who would most likely take over the helm in the not-too-distant future.

The 70-year-old Samy had been president since 1979 and seems in no hurry to step down. He seems to be unperturbed by recent developments which are challenging MCA and Gerakan.

But close associates say that he is very much concerned with what is happening, especially on such issues as the destruction of temples, and following the deaths of former Muslim converts, the tussles between Islamic authorities and their family members for the bodies of the deceased persons.

While there is much that is going on beneath the surface in Sabah, the general view is that the Umno-led Barisan Nasional government is widely accepted and is unlikely to be challenged by another coalition.

In Sarawak, party politics is becoming tumultuous again. Some attribute this to the leadership crisis in the dominant party in the state BN – the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB).

PBB's long-time partner, the Sarawak United Peoples Party (SUPP), suffered a massive setback in

the recent state polls, losing eight seats – one to Keadilan and seven to DAP – of the 19 seats it contested.

The setback also led to a showdown in the party but matters have settled now with the decision by party chief, Tan Sri George Chan, that he would not seek re-election after his two-year term ends in 2008.

In the opposition ranks, the DAP may benefit from the growing disaffection the electorates have with the way the government had handled issues relating to the debates on the NEP and Chinese schools.

The party seems strong and united and seemingly without internal strife. It was heartened by its seven-seat win in the recent Sarawak elections and some of the leaders see it as a precursor of a better performance in the general election.

Another Tanjung project? But the question that is being asked is whether it will work with other parties in order to win a meaningful number of seats.

PAS, meanwhile, has been quiet. Will it go for another round of image-change to make it acceptable as a coalition partner of any other party?

Has the move by Umno to be more Islamic taken the wind out of PAS' Islamic-state sails, forcing it to make a tactical retreat from its long-term objective – a retreat that may make it more amenable to a working arrangement with the DAP?

But the linchpin in any electoral understanding or coalition among the major opposition parties is Keadilan. The popular formula is that Keadilan and DAP would work together in the peninsula's west coast while PAS focuses on the east coast.

But Keadilan adviser Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who is banned from contesting until April 14, 2008, because of his conviction for corruption, is working out some other plans which he is shy of revealing until the elections are announced.

Another question is whether Abdullah will call the general election before Anwar qualifies or it does not really matter to him whether the former Umno deputy president and deputy PM enters the fray or not?