

DATE: 6 / 3 / 2008

Why 'the opposition' remains a pipe dream

NST-6/3/2008

Malaysia does not have a 'traditional' ruling-party-and-opposition system because of historical and socio-political reasons, observes SHAMSUL AMRI BAHARUDDIN

WITH the introduction of modern electoral politics in Malaysia soon after World War 2, the standard "ruling party v opposition party" analytical framework came to be used.

Underpinning this framework is the assumption that there is a two-party system or dichotomy between the ruling party and the opposition, not dissimilar to that of the United States (Republican v Democrats), Britain (Labour v Conservatives) and Australia (Labor v Liberal).

This framework has been convenient for most observers of Malaysian politics and society. As a result, many find it perplexing why, in the last 60 years of the history of our modern electoral politics, there has been a continuous flow in and out of many political parties from within the ruling party coalition, whether Alliance or Barisan Nasional, as well as within the individual component parties.

Almost without fail, every new party formed by splinter groups that left the Alliance, the BN coalition or any of its component parties consisted of disgruntled members.

Eventually, the party would join the ruling coalition, either on its own or in metamorphosed form, perhaps with a fragment from another party.

For instance, Hizbul Muslimin, which later became Parti Islam SeMalaya (Pas), was formed in March 1948 by a group of dissatisfied Malay-Muslim activists, the ulama faction, some of whom were members of Umno, a political party formed in May 1946.

In 1951, no less than the founding president of Umno himself, Datuk Onn Jaafar, left Umno to establish the Independence of Malaya Party.

In July 1974, when Barisan Nasional was formed, Pas was one of six opposition parties that joined what was essentially an expanded Alliance. The other five were Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, the People's Progressive Party, the Sarawak United People's Party and Sabah's Parti Pusaka Bumiputera and the United Sabah National Organisation.

Later, they were joined by more parties from Sarawak and Sabah, including Parti



Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (Berjaya), itself an amalgamation of two formerly indigenous-based parties.

Pas left BN in 1978 in a conflict related to the 1978 election, as a result of which an Emergency was declared in Kelantan.

In 1984, a splinter group within Berjaya left to form Parti Bersatu Sabah, led by Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan. It took control of the Sabah state legislative council from 1985-1994. In between, it joined, left and in 2002 rejoined BN.

In 1987, after massive internal conflict within Umno, yet another splinter group left to form Parti Semangat 46, only to return to Umno's fold in 1996.

Similarly, in April 1999, after then deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and expelled from Umno in 1998, a new party called Parti Keadilan Nasional was formed, which in 2003 merged with Parti Rakyat Malaysia to form Parti Keadilan Rakyat.

The empirical evidence, therefore, indicates clearly that the two-party system concept of ruling party v "the opposition" does not exist in Malaysia. How, then, can we make sense of the opposition and its internal dynamics in Malaysia?

It could be argued that what we have in Malaysia thus far is not "the opposition" but "oppositionism", a rather fluid socio-political phenomenon. There are a number of reasons why such a phenomenon has existed in our political realm, but all could be explained in terms of the "embedded thesis".

Modern political parties were an innovation in our socio-political system, introduced by the British as a way to socialise and condition the ethnically divided plural society it



Datuk Onn Jaafar established the Independence of Malaya Party in 1951.

had created, which was characterised by a systemic internal tension and contradiction as a result of competing interests of all sorts.

However, the new imported political institutions — the modern nation-state and its modern electoral system — had to be embedded into the local socio-political mould that had existed for centuries.

When political parties were introduced in our society, they came to be embedded in pre-existent socio-political fault lines.

For instance, although Umno created an "official" Malay unity on its formation, the member's remained segmented into state-based primordial ties, sub-ethnic associations, the English-educated elite, the ulama faction, and so on.

Any component from within Umno with a strong leadership could leave Umno and create its own party. Some left forever, others repented and rejoined.

Similar patterns, too, exist in other ethnic parties, such as

the MCA and MIC. As a result, a stable, consistent and identifiable "the opposition" has never been realised in Malaysia.

There have been many attempts by various political parties to form an alternative coalition. The Socialist Front tried in the 1960s, combining the Malay-based Socialist Party with the non-Malay-based Labour Party, with limited success.

In the 1990s, Pas, Semangat 46 and a few smaller parties formed a loose coalition and succeeded in Kelantan. The bigger coalition was Barisan Alternatif, which performed quite well in the 1999 election, mainly at the expense of Umno.

Because it was such a loosely structured coalition — indeed, a marriage of convenience — it flourished and failed in the 2004 election.

With an experienced, respected, capable and charismatic leader, "the opposition" could yet become a reality in the next few elections. Demographically, there are three types of electoral seats in our system: Malay-majority, non-Malay majority, and ethnically mixed seats.

If a new "alternative coalition" is registered as a full-fledged political party like BN, Pas could then concentrate on Malay-majority seats and the DAP on non-Malay seats. PKR, by virtue of its multi-ethnic character, could contest all seats, especially mixed ones.

In other words, "the opposition" has to be in the form of an established and registered formal coalition; a mirror image of BN.

If there is a serious effort among the main opposition parties to avoid contesting against one another; if urban voters are becoming more independent-minded about whom they vote for; and if the alternative media of the Internet spread wider and further in the populace, we might yet witness the dawn of a new alternative coalition.

Such hopes have arisen before, but all have so far been false dawns.

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