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Key reforms put BN on the winning path

With the Barisan Nasional convention over, the coalition parties are readying to strike back, writes ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR

HISTORY was created in the Barisan Nasional, Malaysia's time-tested governing arrangement, when its 13-member partners adopted a charter that reflects their readiness to effect political transformation to raise the people's trust and confidence in the coalition.

A pledge was taken on Sunday by more than 2,000 delegates at the end of the day-long BN convention at Wisma MCA, in Kuala Lumpur to reshape and reinvent BN as contained in the charter.

The BN was formed in 1974 as a broader-based successor to the Alliance coalition. It has ruled the country since independence from the British in 1957.

The rare gathering of the coalition partners, according to Rita Sim, a fellow at the Centre of Strategic Engagement (Cense), was geared to putting the coalition's house in order, a prerequisite for its revival.

Having initiated key reforms in the government by implementing action plans, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak want on to correct political flaws in BN, which he chairs.

"Najib has initiated 1Malaysia, the New Economic Model, Government Transformation Plan and Economic Transformation Plan, among others, since taking over last year.

"Now, he is moving into another phase, that is in the political front, to get the BN more organised," said Sim, who was formerly deputy chairman of MCA think tank, Insap.

The BN charter is based on these principles:

- Upholding the supremacy of the Constitution and rule of law.
- Strengthening race relations and multiracialism in line with the concept of 1Malaysia.
- Pursuing the improvement of the nation's economy by increasing competitiveness, and at the same time to bestow assurance towards fair economic distribution.
- Assuring quality education is given to all.
- Improving the quality of life and to continue giving priority to economic development and social welfare.



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak signing the Barisan Nasional Charter during the BN convention at Wisma MCA in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday. — Bernama picture

- Strengthening the family institution.
- Carrying out the principle of positive management and rejecting corrupt practices.

Now that almost all BN components that fared badly in the last general election have moved on, some with new people at the helm, the focus is on regaining the trust of the electorate, particularly young people, who will form a big chunk of eligible voters in the next polls.

Key race-based BN parties like Umno, MCA and MIC have gone through a process of self-examination, even experiencing inter and intra-party squabbles.

The parties have even engaged in a war of words as each grapples with its own issues to satisfy calls for change from the electorate.

Although BN's individual parties may practise racial and religious politics, ethnic and religious tensions — the two factors that contributed to BN's electoral losses — can be eased if there is concerted effort on the part of all component parties.

Without a commitment to discuss concerns, address differences and seek a better understanding of each other, intra-coalition relations cannot be improved.

This would mean that hopes of BN rising as a united and strong force, far superceding Pakatan Rakyat at state and

national levels, would attenuate.

BN leaders have now accepted the fact that the coalition, post-2008, has to be more inclusive, attractive and vibrant to win the hearts and minds of people.

It means that business for BN cannot be as usual anymore. Changes have to be carried out to satisfy the demands, aspirations and expectations of a society that has evolved to become more mature and desirous of openness.

Candidates representing BN, including the leaders of its component parties, were defeated by the opposition in the March 2008 general election.

The next national election is only due in by May 2013, although talk of a snap election next year lingers.

There have been mixed views as to whether Najib was beating the battle drums at the convention.

Those who regard the "family gathering" as "readying the army" said the prime minister was emphasising his earlier warnings to BN leaders to accept the reality that the coalition is fighting on fluid ground for support.

That is why he stressed the need for BN members to rid themselves of delusion, amnesia, inertia and arrogance, the malaise that befalls political parties that have been in power for a long time, in order to continue winning the people

over, bearing in mind the more discerning electorate.

Basically, BN must act in the interest of the people first and in all matters, to achieve success.

A delegate at the closed-door convention said that Najib, in his winding-up speech, likened BN members' reluctance to change to a rotting fish, which starts decomposing from its head and then to other parts of the body.

"If the head is determined to change, all the four ailments fatal to BN — delusion, amnesia, inertia and arrogance — will not be there and we are set to change," he said.

Today's electorate is more demanding. Malaysians in general expect the prime minister's commitment to promoting inclusivity and implementing impact policies to prove beneficial.

"BN can lose votes if people continuously feel they have been burdened, like the effects of frequent price hikes on their budget or when impact policies fail to provide short and medium term gains," said Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Associate Professor Mohammad Agus "Yusoff.

Agus said the economic development corridors initiated by the government under the administration of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi failed to impress the electorate in the last general election, because ordinary people could not relate to these projects.

"If people are happy, there is no reason why they would not want to return to the status quo to allow BN to continue to rule," he said.

BN leaders, including former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, may have conceded that the coalition would likely remain in power but would not regain its two-thirds parliamentary majority in the next general election. But the outcome would largely depend on how well BN manages to convince voters.

With only eight seats short of the two-thirds, added to the fact that a sizeable number of seats were won by the opposition with slim margins, regaining the overwhelming majority is within reach, if BN strikes the right chords.