

Ideology, race still in way of single BN party idea
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By Ida Lim

KUALA LUMPUR, May 31 — There is growing consensus for Barisan Nasional (BN) component parties to collapse into a single multiracial party in order to arrest the decline in support from voters, but Umno and right-wing Malay politicians remain a major obstacle.

Another major challenge for the idea would be the kind of ideology a single BN party can offer voters who appear to be moving away from race politics, political analysts have told The Malaysian Insider.

On Wednesday, Perkasa — the Malay rights group which has become the voice of the right wing in Umno — had warned politicians against the idea of folding Umno into a single BN party.

The warning came despite remarks from Umno secretary-general Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor that a BN party would still likely be led by a Malay.

Observers have noted that a new BN party would only be workable if it adopted the ideology of a united and inclusive Malaysia.

Prof Dr Jayum A. Jawan from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) said it was a good time for BN to go beyond race-based politics.

“We have experienced the ups and downs with race-based politics and it’s about time to experiment with new model to move forward. What better time than when communities are divided over political ideologies, political parties?” he asked.

He said that BN could possibly take on the vision of inclusiveness, rooting for the idea where politicians effectively represent the needs of all Malaysians.

“Malaysians want an inclusive Malaysia. The idea of inclusiveness that is already practised, I think that will get the acceptance of everybody,” he said.

Prof Shaharuddin Badaruddin from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) similarly said it was time for BN to move forward, saying that the coalition has no other choice but to shed its 55-year-old Umno-dominated set-up by turning into a “big multiracial party” that was inclusive.

“That’s one of the things they need to look at after GE13 because you already have colour-blind politics,” he said, noting that this voting pattern had happened in many cities, although he noted that some voters still voted along ethnic lines.

He said BN had always taken a “pragmatic” approach and could pick and choose from various ideologies which, he said, could be based on the study of what it wants the nation to be.

“Definitely not based on ethnicity,” he said of the new ideology for BN.

Shaharuddin further suggested that BN’s political rival Pakatan Rakyat (PR), which is

currently a loose pact of three parties — PKR, the DAP, PAS — be allowed to form a single party.

“If you want to create a big multi-ethnic party, you have to let PR be one big party. The possibility of doing that two-party system will change our scenario... So that means you dissolve politics of past. You are going towards new politics,” he said.

He also said BN would face the challenge of changing its working culture, saying that component parties had previously worked within their respective parties before coming together in the Cabinet and for elections.

“The challenge that BN faces is the culture of working within one big party,” he said, saying that the coalition may have to take up to three years to gradually change before merging into a single party.

Dr Andrew Aeria from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) also supported the idea of a single BN party, saying it was time for the component parties to consider the matter seriously

“After all Dr Mahathir was talking about Bangsa Malaysia. Tun Abdullah talked about ‘Islam Hadhari’ civilised democracy which has no recognition of ethnic ideology. PM Najib talks about 1 Malaysia.

“All three PMs we just had talked about unity, one people, one Malaysia, one identity. If they can talk like that in normal times, why can’t their politics reflect what they are saying?” the academic asked.

“Ethnic politics, regional politics is on the way out,” Aeria said, adding that people like and accept the concept of “Bangsa Malaysia”.

“Either they face up to reality or they can look towards their demise,” he said, when asked about the possibility that ethnic-based parties in BN may argue against the Bangsa Malaysia concept.

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Prof James Chin said the proposal for the BN merger was a recognition that a large number of people in the urban areas “believe in a non-racial approach to politics”, saying that BN could use the ideology of “1 Malaysia”.

“It’ll be most likely Malay president,” Chin said of the possible leadership of a solitary BN party, saying that Malaysians generally tend to elect those of their own kind despite many of them believing in multiracial politics.

Like Jayum, Chin pointed out that there are already many multiracial political parties in Malaysia, citing BN’s Gerakan and PR’s PKR as examples, but said some Malaysians still view them as ethnic-based parties.

Jayum said a Malay leader would likely be elected to head a single BN party, with the number two position possibly coming from the other ethnic groups in the country.

He cited the reality of Malaysia where the Malay community makes up the largest percentage of the population and BN's membership base.

"Although you will not say in (party) constitution, but political reality will dictate it has to be a Malay," he said, saying that a non-Malay heading BN was not a practical option for Malaysia right now, but could likely happen in 20 to 30 years' time.

"We can't expect small community with small base in party to emerge as leader unless that person has extraordinary qualities," Jayum said.

When asked about the possibility that a non-Malay leader would lead the party in the future, Shaharuddin said that could possibly happen in 15 to 20 years' time, saying it took a long time for the US to have an African-American president.

"Why not? Maybe by creating a big multiracial party, we can educate people as a starting point," he said.

Aeria said Malaysians are no longer talking about race, but about merit, competence and credibility.

"Let the best people be leaders on basis of merit. There should be open contest for position and best candidate wins based on merit.

"If they are talking about Bangsa Malaysia, why does it have to be Malay?" he asked, adding, "if it's Bangsa Malaysia, it will be a Malaysian on the basis of merit."

Despite talk about a single BN party, Chin said it would likely die down after six months, chalking it down to nothing more than a reaction to the 13th general election.

"This is a reaction to GE, nothing more than that," he said, adding that there was a lack of support for the idea among a majority of Umno's members.

He said that there was greater political will for the setting up of an additional party called Barisan Nasional that would be open to all, while the BN component parties remain as they are.

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