

**With only Gerakan backing, sole BN party idea dead in the water**  
**Malaysian Insider**  
**June 5, 2013**  
**By Boo Su-Lyn**

KUALA LUMPUR, June 5 — Several Barisan Nasional (BN) politicians have poured cold water on the proposal for the ruling coalition to merge into a single party open to all races, with only the multi-racial Gerakan pushing for it.

Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had set the tone against the idea when he reportedly said on Monday that it was not yet time for race-based BN components to merge into a multi-racial party, noting that Malaysians were currently unable to “set aside race and come under one party”.

“People are still thinking along racial lines,” Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan told The Malaysian Insider.

The Sabah Umno secretary pointed out that suspicion towards other races was present even in the multi-racial Berjaya party that governed Sabah from 1976 to 1985 under Tan Sri Harris Salleh.

“The leaders were still thinking of their own race... so the moment they feel marginalised, rightly or wrongly, the perception will turn into instability in the party itself. When suspicion becomes stronger and stronger, the party will be very weak,” said Abdul Rahman.

Umno information chief Datuk Ahmad Maslan also reportedly said last Saturday that a single BN party would be difficult to form because minority groups might be sidelined.

“We know that in Sabah and Sarawak, BN has component parties representing various ethnic groups who are small in terms of numbers and if the BN is merged into a single party, their voice will be eroded,” Ahmad was quoted as saying by national news agency Bernama.

Abdul Rahman Dahlan said, however, that BN could open up entry via direct membership instead.

“If there’s tremendous response from people on direct membership, then go for the second stage — making BN a full-fledged political party,” he said.

MCA vice-president Datuk Donald Lim said that it would probably take between five and ten years for BN’s 13 component parties to merge into one, noting that Malay-majority Malaysia still has “not reached the stage where everyone is equal”.

“Pakatan is multi-racial, but still the Malays are dominating,” Lim told The Malaysian Insider, referring to federal opposition pact Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

Lim said that BN’s Chinese- and Indian-based parties could merge into two separate parties respectively, as well as the parties in Sabah and Sarawak, so that the ruling coalition would just have five parties representing the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Sabah and Sarawak communities.

He also noted that Umno might not agree with BN forming a single multi-racial party,

pointing out that the BN lynchpin had increased its federal seat tally from 79 in Election 2008 to 88 in Election 2013.

"Umno will say, 'Nothing wrong, I increased the members of parliament. I got no problem. You got your problem, MCA,'" said Lim.

MCA recorded its worst electoral showing by taking just seven parliamentary and 11 state seats in the May 5 general polls.

But Gerakan acting president Datuk Chang Ko Youn, who had first mooted the proposal of BN merging into a single multi-racial party, insisted today that BN needed to change its age-old race-based structure to halt declining support from young voters.

"If you still hold on to the same approach and ideology without changing the structure and also the strategy, I'm afraid that Umno's grip on power will be eroded year by year," Chang told The Malaysian Insider.

"As society becomes more urbanised, with more and more Malays coming to urban areas, Umno just has to transform itself to meet the aspirations of the younger generation," he added.

Analysts have noted that BN retained power in the 13th general election on the back of rural support, with the middle-class and urban electorate voting for PR across racial lines.

Chang stressed that a single BN party would still be able to protect Bumiputera interests because the Bumiputeras are "part and parcel of Malaysians".

Malay rights group Perkasa, however, said last week that those who attempted to erase Umno are "traitors" and stressed that it would "fight till the end" against the reinvention of BN as a single party.

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