

On 1Malaysia, its critics have the last word

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Once, the 1Malaysia slogan was part of the everyday discourse in the country, driven by a prime minister who believed that the fuzzy, warm feeling of togetherness promoted by this concept could supplant deep racial divisions in Malaysia – and yield significant non-Malay gains for Barisan Nasional in the general election.

But after the May 5 elections returned the BN to power without the treasured two-thirds majority in Parliament and popular support, and with a deep feeling of betrayal coursing through the veins of Umno politicians from Datuk Seri Najib Razak downwards, 1Malaysia seems like a concept from a different time.

Even the PM rarely refers to the slogan his administration coined as its motto.

His ministers have all but forgotten it and the mood in Umno and Perkasa – raw by overwhelming support of Chinese for the Opposition – is that 1Malaysia was rejected at the polls by the electorate and therefore should be made a historical artifact by Najib.

Just listen to Datuk Ibrahim Ali, the Perkasa chief who contested and lost the Pasir Mas ticket on the Barisan Nasional ticket.

He said that the 1Malaysia concept was dead as soon as the Najib administration blamed the Chinese for BN's poor showing in the elections.

On hindsight, the idea of oneness among the different races could not have worked because it was anchored on a wrong assumption: that the root problems faced by non-Malays could be addressed by dispensing cash handouts through the Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (BR1M).

Ibrahim noted: "To Najib the best and quick way was to dish out BR1M and keep it coming. This was an insult to the intelligence of non-Malays. After all this BR1Ms, the handouts given towards the development of schools and the MOU with Hindraf, did the Chinese and Indian votes come back?"

"Both BR1M and 1Malaysia have one thing in common. Both will be short-lived." Ibrahim bristled at suggestions that Perkasa, with its right-wing rhetoric, had made it difficult from the 1Malaysia concept to be truly embraced by non-Malay voters, pointing out instead that the election strategy employed by Najib's team was muddled.

At times, he said, the campaign was more about "I LOVE PM" banners than anything substantial to tackle root causes of unhappiness.

Turn back the clock to 2009 and it seems hard to imagine the roiling debate about whether the 1Malaysia concept should be orphaned.

Najib had just taken over from Abdullah Badawi and the lessons from the 2008 elections were still clear; non-Malays, especially the Indians had deserted BN over concerns about their place under the Malaysian sun.

Najib and his strategists believed that 1Malaysia, despite its strategic ambiguity, would foster

a sense of unity. Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research executive director Ibrahim Suffian said the 1Malaysia concept was introduced as the Barisan Nasional bloc was unable to address the fundamental issues afflicting the Chinese and Indian communities.

"Hence they went for something simple called 1Malaysia but there was a major flaw in the concept as there was no coherence or regularity.

"The concept of unity was non-existent as to the Malays, they (BN) talk about Malay sensitivities, promoting topics such as Christianisation of Malays for an example and to the Chinese and Indians, differing topics," Ibrahim said.

"The issues surrounding the Chinese community especially were not fully addressed and the Indians, only a fraction.

"The efforts carried out did not reflect the campaign's original or intended spirit. The 1Malaysia campaign was running on a whole different level.

"1Malaysia was the least worst option they could conjure, hence the result," he said referring to BN's worst performance yet, in the May 5th polls.

While he feels that 1Malaysia is not "dead", Ibrahim says it bears no relevance either as it remains only a slogan.

"BN needs a new, fresh idea and campaign." Penang chief minister Lim Guan Eng agreed that the 1Malaysia concept was an "empty election slogan".

"After the GE, we have seen the PM discard it like a used diaper. It was a political exercise that was completely abandoned once they achieved what they wanted.

"It shows that he does not practise what he preaches," Lim added.

He said the prime minister's test would be whether or not he reverses the decision made by Malacca chief minister Datuk Idris Harun to close Jonker Walk.

"Otherwise it is just political vengeance," the DAP secretary-general said.

Batu MP Tian Chua was more scathing.

"The 1Malaysia concept is a hollow slogan which has been assigned to things like 1M shops, 1M barbers, 1M gas cylinders.

"Unfortunately, besides putting a label for some products, there was never really any talk about racial integrity," he added.

Tian Chua said while he never thought it was a great concept, he admitted the country needed comprehensive and well-thought out integration policies.

"We need policies that can foster and preserve interracial relationships, " he said, adding that the PM was now more interested in the upcoming Umno elections than racial integration. - June 27, 2013.

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