

Fracturing along racial lines, BN needs to start healing Malaysia
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Somebody, someone better step in because never before has the stereotyping been this bad, this widespread, this debilitating and potentially irreversible for Malaysia.

And the big loser along this road to perdition will be Umno and Barisan Nasional (BN).

In the eyes of a significant number in Umno, the non-Malays who voted with their feet in GE13 are traitors and ingrates who must be punished, the harder the better.

The form of punishment yearned for ranges from depriving the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) supporters of cash handouts to penalising businesses owned by Chinese to completely erasing the concerns of non-Malays in policy-making.

No doubt some of this is just talk, borne out of anger and frustration by BN members not being able to deliver what they believed was a minimum target: regaining two-thirds majority control of Parliament.

But there are enough Umno politicians bending Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's ears about a more punitive approach against non-Malays to suggest that this toxic thinking will poison decision making, sooner rather than later.

At the very least, they want him to publicly thank Malays, especially those in rural areas, and Bumiputeras for returning BN to power.

Already, Najib is showing signs of being led down the narrow road of vindictiveness, indicating recently that BN-held states will benefit from having friends in Putrajaya.

Weakened and wounded after not delivering the big victory he promised, Najib is more preoccupied with surviving the Umno elections in October than playing the role of statesman. And if it means that victory can be achieved by pandering to Utusan Malaysia as he did yesterday, so be it.

And if it means keeping silent in the wake of scurrilous and coffee shop talk against Christians being dressed up as fact by Umno's right wing, so be it.

When the rabid Utusan Malaysia tore into a senior Ministry of International Trade and Industry official who is leading the Malaysian delegation in trade negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, Najib only voiced his regret behind closed doors. The official is a non-Malay and the Umno newspaper's attack was way below the belt.

But here is the reality.

This punish-those-who-did-not-vote-for-BN strategy will not only polarise Malaysia further but will also entrench a them-versus-us syndrome that will pit Malaysian against Malaysian in every sphere of life. Imagine the fractious nature of Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan without the bloodshed.

And for those right-wing Umno and BN supporters urging the dawn of this day, here is a

more sobering message: You will end up with a smaller support base by the time the next polls are called in five years.

Surveys of the voting pattern in GE13 show that despite its fighting rhetoric from 2011 till 2013, Umno/BN only managed to snare 61.6% of the Malay vote, a mere 1.5% increase from 2008. Also, the most right-wing of candidates - Datuk Ibrahim Ali, Datuk Zulkifli Noordin and Datuk Dr Puad Zarkashi - were rejected by voters in Malay-majority seats.

Pollsters and researchers believe that if Umno/BN just focus on playing the Malay and Muslim card, the share of the Malay vote could drop to as low as 58% in five years. This is based on several assumptions, including the fact that natural attrition will be highest amongst those aged 60 and above, Umno's largest support base.

There are other warning signs for an Umno bent on rewarding its own, punishing its opponents and playing divisive politics.

The East Malaysian state of Sabah is no longer a fixed deposit and Putrajaya's policy of alienating the largely Christian Kadazandusun community with its confrontational approach against the church will only hurt it further at the ballot box.

On May 5, BN won less than 45% of the votes in Kadazandusun-majority seats. This percentage will certainly go down if the knot of outstanding Christian issues remain unresolved and the government continues to treat the illegal immigrant situation with wanton disregard.

Sarawak will remain a strong BN state only as long as strongman Tan Sri Taib Mahmud is around. Without him, the fear factor will be gone as well as the organisational capability that allowed Taib to block PR from making headway in the state.

But this state, with its collection of different groups of indigenous people, has never been one that supports right-wing Malay rhetoric. Indeed, Taib still cannot understand Putrajaya's decision to outlaw the use of the word Allah by Christians.

Then, there is steady growth in the number of Malaysians who depend on the Internet as the source of political and current affairs news. In GE13, nearly 57% of those aged 40 and above received their news about Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Najib from news portals and blogs.

This percentage will only increase as the Internet penetration in the country grows. And despite Putrajaya spending millions of ringgit on bloggers and cyber troopers, the Internet is the domain of the opposition and anti-establishment forces.

It is here that the increasingly right-wing tendency of Umno is being exposed, dissected and debated robustly. There is no free pass for Najib and his comrades in this medium and the more Umno slides down the way of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Ibrahim Ali, the more the push back from Malaysia's netizens, many of them the same voters who gave PR the bragging rights of winning the popular vote at the May 5 general election.

Against this backdrop, it is stupid and reckless for Umno/BN to still persist with its racist and narrow politics which only allowed it to hold on to power narrowly. Surely, regaining the two-thirds majority of Parliament will be out of the question without the return of some non-Malay votes.

Unless its only ambition is to keep power with an ever smaller majority. - September 14, 2013.

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