

Umno: Balancing Leadership and Agenda

Throughout Malaysia's political history, Umno has proven itself when solving dissension and overcoming differences.

A VISITING delegation from the Thai National Economic and Social Advisory Council that was in Kuala Lumpur recently, gave high marks to Malaysia's continuing efforts to stamp out corruption.

It referred specifically to the charging of a cabinet minister – Tan Sri Kasitah Gadam – soon after Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi became Prime Minister last November. Kasitah resigned soon afterwards.

The Thai delegation, which comprised members of its Corruption Investigation Committee, believed it could learn from Malaysia's experience.

It is nice to know that outsiders are taking notice of our actions. That is after all part of the plan. We have to convince outsiders – investors and visitors alike – that they will not become victims of corrupt practices in our country.

Having created a high level of expectation among our own people and outsiders, the Government must now work very hard to fulfil it.

But, fighting corruption is not as straightforward as charging a minister, state assemblyman, tycoon, civil servant or policeman. Prosecution is and should always be the last resort. And it should not be left to the Government alone.

Corruption imposes a high cost on

society. Investigating and charging a person with corruption is a costly affair. Getting a conviction is even harder. Like taking care of our health, prevention is better than cure.

Corruption does not happen by itself. It is the result of the abuse of power either in the active or passive form. It thus follows that only people with power can cause corruption to happen.

There are an awful lot of people – starting with file searchers to district officers, from *mata-mata* (constables) to the inspectors and higher, from *pecacai politik* (lowly political operators) to the Menteri Besar. The list goes on.

And in today's monetised world, money is power. A person with money can abuse and corrupt the system. So, we have on one hand, people who abuse their power to obtain bribes and on the other, people who use money to bribe those with power.

Some people deliberately abuse their power for financial gains, while others avail themselves to bribery and *duit kopi* (coffee money) by not performing their job efficiently.

Thus, a lazy or an inept civil servant can create an opportunity for bribes for himself. This may not amount to an abuse of power, but it can still lead to corruption when a person dealing with him thinks that by bribing him he could get the job done.

The answer to the problem is for civil servants to carry out their duties diligently and for members of the public not to break the law. There is no need to give policemen or City Hall enforcement officers bribes if they do not break the law in the first place. Breaking the law is wrong and giving bribes makes it worse.

Whether the abuse of power and corruption are prevalent or are mere perception, there are Malaysians who think it is perfectly alright to give bribes if they get something out of it – like not being issued with a summons for beating the traffic lights.

This negative perception is so prevalent that every successful person, whether he is a businessman or manager, is suspected of having resorted to corrupt practices to get where he is.

GIVING SECOND CHANCES

AS the race for the Umno Supreme Council posts gain momentum, rekindling hopes that democracy will once again blossom in the country's largest political party, some quality time must be spared on articulating (or rearticulating) thoughts on key issues facing the country.

One such issue is ensuring that the return to a high rate of economic growth is

accompanied by fair distribution. Barring major global economic upheavals, the Malaysian economy looks set to return to the path of high growth.

Winning a party position is not in itself an end. Or is it? Let us hope not. Winning a post, whether in the Wanita, Youth and Puteri wings or in the Supreme Council, should remain a means of achieving an end, which is serving the people.

It is alright to challenge anybody for any post in the party as long as it is in accordance with the rules and regulations. After all, that is how a democratic political party chooses its leaders.

The Umno Supreme Council might have decided on a 'no contest' stance for certain posts and state liaison committees might be issuing their lists of preferred candidates and giving all kinds of instructions – including some absurd ones – but that does not mean members are helpless. The party constitution is supreme.

Only when rules and regulations are ignored or when an aggrieved party decides to take the party to court do problems begin. History has shown that Umno is pretty good at overcoming dissension and solving differences.

Even in the worst case of the party being dragged to court in the aftermath of the rancorous 1987 elections, resulting in it being declared unlawful, Umno was able to patch up the differences and heal wounds.

There is no better proof of this than the return to the party and subsequent rehabilitation of the likes of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Datuk Seri Rais Yatim, Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad and Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad.

Tengku Razaleigh, Rais and Radzi were key members of 'Team B' who left to form the now defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46 after failing to wrest Umno from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Shahrir did not join Semangat 46, but left Umno to contest as an independent in Johor Bahru in the 1990 general election and won with a huge majority against the Barisan Nasional (BN) candidate.

Dr Mahathir brought Tengku Razaleigh into the Supreme Council and appointed Rais to the Cabinet despite the latter having openly declared that he had burnt his bridges to Umno. Abdullah made Radzi Umno secretary-general and appointed

Shahrir as the head of BN's backbenchers in Parliament.

Even the staunchest supporters of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, including a few who left to form Parti Keadilan, are not only back in Umno, but in favour as well. This is the redeeming nature of Umno.

Thus, what is so surprising if Tengku Razaleigh openly declared his willingness to contest the post of Umno President?

Despite being out of the leadership hierarchy for close to two decades, Tengku Razaleigh remains a formidable figure. Being one of the key personalities in Tun Razak's and Tun Hussein's governments, he has a core of loyal supporters and has done some spectacular things in his heyday like wresting Kelantan from Pas in the late seventies and presiding over the Finance Ministry.

Admittedly, however, with the Supreme Council's 'no contest' stance for the top two posts and the likelihood of the state liaison committees toeing the line, Tengku Razaleigh's chances of getting the required number of divisional nominations are limited. The Gua Musang Member of Parliament himself may not want to fight another losing battle.

But, those who are schooled in the history of Umno will continue to recognise his contribution to Umno, the Government and the Malays.

CONTINUING THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

THE economy has steadily been on the recovery path since Dr Mahathir warded off attempts to surrender sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the aftermath of the 1997 regional economic crisis.

His economic stimulus packages accelerated the implementation of the Eighth Malaysia Plan projects. The initial effects of his recovery plan stopped the economy from tail spinning and put it back on the growth path.

Thus, in less than half a year after he retired, his successor was able to announce the highest quarterly growth since the crisis, at 7.6% for the first quarter of the current year. In recent days, Bank Negara Governor, Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz,

hinted that growth for the second quarter could be just as impressive.

With the prospects for sustained high growth becoming more established and Abdullah himself initiating a new expenditure package totalling RM8.5 billion, renewed efforts must be made to ensure that the new round of growth is accompanied by equitable wealth distribution.

Abdullah has, from the very beginning of his tenure, been speaking about welfare of the ordinary people by, among other things, addressing the issue of poverty. This should not be seen as a populist stance, but as a matter of considerable urgency.

Like Dr Mahathir, Abdullah is not unfamiliar with poverty. They both came from the Malay heartlands, which three decades ago, were synonymous with poverty and deprivation, and were keenly involved in the formulation of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

It does not take much to convince Abdullah that poverty continues to be a threat and that, as a result of the 1997/98 crisis, has shown a marked increase. Complicating matters is the widening rural-urban gap, which will inevitably encompass ethnic inequality, and growing disparity between the poorest and richest segments of society.

Much has been written in this column about the impact of the 1997/98 crisis on poverty both in the rural and urban areas. The subject has also been widely discussed in the mid-term review of the Eighth Malaysia Plan and in the report of the Second Economic Consultative Council (Mapen 2), which was submitted to the Government two years ago.

KEEPING THE NEP GOING

WHILE it is undeniable that many Bumiputeras and the minority Indians have made great leaps into the middle class and corporate world, an equally large number is still trapped in poverty.

The duality of the colonial economic system – a fact that was refreshed by Norwegian economist, Just Faaland, English economist, Professor Jack R Parkinson and Malaysian economist, Dr Rais Saniman in their book *Growth and Ethnic Inequality* (Utusan Publications &

Distributors Sdn Bhd) – impacted the Malays and Indians most.

In the colonial era, the Malays were confined to subsistence agriculture and the Indians to the estates, leaving the British and Chinese in the commercial and industrial sectors.

Incidentally, Faaland was closely associated with the formulation of the NEP by Tun Abdul Razak in the aftermath of the May 13, 1969 racial riots. He was then the Malaysian project director for the Harvard University Development Advisory Group.

The stark reality is, many more rural inhabitants, most of whom are Malays and other Bumiputeras, would have fallen below the poverty level had it not been for Government subsidies and the sharing of wealth through the extended family system.

Sadly, there are successful Bumiputeras who seem to think that NEP-type programmes are outmoded and income distribution should be sacrificed for the sake of high growth.

Hopefully, none of these perverted views prevail in Umno and other BN parties.

Umno would be failing in its duties if the issue of income distribution is not thoroughly discussed at its September assembly.

The social impact of inequality is there for everyone to see. All that is needed is cursory interest. Take convicted criminals for instance. The number of Malays convicted for crimes has risen from 11,307 or 62.7% of the total in 1997 to 16,680 or 65.5% in 2001.

The number of convicted Indians rose significantly from 2,485 (13.8% of total) in 1997 to 3,299 (13%) in 2001.


The number of convictions among Malays and Indians are more or less in proportion to their share of the population. Convictions among the Chinese are lower – 2,912 or 16.1% in 1997 rising to 3,968 or 15.6% in 2001. A similar trend is seen in juvenile crimes, dadah addiction and trafficking, and sexual offences.

Some will almost certainly trivialise the issue by saying that Malays and Indians are bad criminals so they get caught and convicted. That may be so, but unless we confront socio-economic issues squarely,

we run the risk of going back to pre-NEP days, which cannot be good for anyone.

Equitable growth is not just a question of policy. It has become a key indicator in the global human rights standard.

The writer cannot agree more with the assertion of two up-and-coming young Malaysian opinion leaders – Mukhriz Mahathir and Khairy Jamaluddin – in their recent book *Malaysia's New Economic Policy: An Overview* (Utusan Publications & Distributor Sdn Bhd).

Here's an extraction from the book, 'For Malaysia to realise the ideals of Rukun Negara and to formulate and implement the required NEP-type restructuring of the national economy, it is essential that there be broad ranging support derived from at least basic knowledge of the NEP as a guiding strategy and cornerstone in our common efforts to build a prosperous and harmonious Malaysia of the future.' 

E-mail: akadirjasin@beritapub.com.my
Besides 'Malaysian Business', Kadir also contributes to local Bahasa Malaysia and English newspapers. These articles can be accessed at www.beritapublishing.com.my under the heading 'In My Own Write'.