

## **One year older, one year wiser?**

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One year after March 8, 2008, one gets the impression that Malaysians are tired of the politicking that has been going on incessantly since then. This sense of dissatisfaction was perhaps best captured by a one-page newspaper ad that Malaysian businessman Anas Zubedy placed recently, calling for a truce between the country's political parties. Malaysia has had too much politics and precious little governance in the past year.

It was only last week that Malaysia's economic think-tanks began to sound dire warnings about the recession that has arrived in the country. Fears of massive layoffs, rising urban crime, the breakdown of social services and political uncertainty in the state of Perak have made Malaysians wonder what March 2008 was all about. All the political parties promised an era of renewal, a new politics for a new Malaysia.

Malaysia desperately needs such a new politics, though what it needs isn't all that new.

Reading the biography of my late uncle Azizan Zainul Abidin - former head of Petronas - I am reminded that Malaysia was able not so long ago to take pride in having created a generation of professional civil servants and corporate managers. Tan Sri Azizan was a Malay nationalist who firmly believed in a multicultural Malaysia where all Malaysians could feel at home.

Today, however, Malaysia is faced with a plethora of demands that are divisive and sectarian in nature. The challenge is to bring these demands together in a spirit of compromise. But how can this happen if Malaysia's politicians are consumed with winning seats, crossovers and taking as much control of the country as possible?

The highs of 2008 were by and large momentary and artificial: Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's much talked about 'takeover' of the federal government last September never materialised. The constitutional impasse that has become a deadlock in Perak threatens - as senior politician Tengku Razaleigh put it - to take the country down the road of illegality even further.

All of Malaysia's political parties must realise that the country is facing what may be the greatest economic disaster it has ever faced. While other countries are hunkering down and conserving their resources for the long winter to come, Malaysia is consumed with populist politics.

Yet playing the populist card and appealing to one's natural gallery is not an option for Malaysian politicians any longer. The positive aspect of the March 2008 elections was that it demonstrated that communal race-based politics may well be on the wane in the country. In the wired-up Malaysia of today, politicians need to realise that they must speak to a new constituency of better-informed and better-educated voters.

For now, however, the millions of Malaysian voters who voted last year have been reduced to being passive observers in a political drama that is slowly turning into a farce. Some Malaysians, like Mr Anas, have already signalled their disappointment with both sides.

But are the politicians listening. Will they stop politicking and begin governing?

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