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No. 094/2013 dated 15 May 2013

Malaysian Politics Post-GE13: The Deracialisation of BN?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

In the wake of the mixed results of the recent general election, the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (BN), has been thrown into a state of introspection. Early signs point to a fundamental rethink of its identity as a race-based coalition.

Commentary

ON THE 44th anniversary of the 13 May 1969 racial riots that gave birth to it, Malaysia's ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) displayed signs of being in catharsis. Though it won the 13th general election on 5 May 2013 by securing the majority of parliamentary seats, BN lost the popular vote and failed to wrest back its two-thirds parliamentary majority in the face of a strong showing by the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR).

While BN was relieved to have been returned to power, thus denying PR its goal of regime change, the results were nevertheless a body blow that sent BN into deep introspection. A significant upshot is a proposal to transform itself from the current model of a coalition of communal parties into a single, merged multi-racial entity.

The deracialisation of Malaysian politics?

Significantly too, this idea came from no less than the secretary-general of UMNO, the party that is the lynchpin of BN and the epitome of Malaysia's communal politics. Given his key position, Tengku Adnan Mansor could well be reflecting an internal debate now spilling into the open. Clearly, Malaysian politics is in a state of flux following the country's "mother of all elections".

Other UMNO leaders who have begun to publicly float such "radical" views in the wake of GE13 are Nazri Aziz and Saifuddin Abdullah, both members of the UMNO Supreme Council and the last cabinet. While Adnan and Nazri successfully defended their parliamentary seats, Saifuddin lost his despite being known for his reformist views. Nazri started the ball rolling by calling for BN to *ubah* – the same clarion call for change which the opposition used so effectively during the hustings. Nazri described the BN as "outdated" and a political vehicle that does not resonate with the younger voters.

His comments evoked a response from Tengku Adnan who suggested that the ruling coalition could rebrand itself by merging its more than a dozen communal-oriented components into a single race-neutral party. "BN

could perhaps be made into a single party that is no longer race-based someday,” he was quoted as saying in an interview with *Malay Mail*. In fact, the idea of rebranding and renewing BN was first publicly mooted by the reform-minded ex-MP Saifuddin. On the day after his defeat he said “we are lucky to still be in government at the federal level”. To strengthen its position, he added, “we need to rebrand, there needs to be a new BN”.

These views are likely to provoke further debates in the public domain and the corridors of power in the immediate future. Prime Minister Najib Razak, in his usual style, will allow the discourse to proceed, to see where the wind blows, and eventually decide on what he should ultimately do. He is likely to frame this within his larger post-election template of national reconciliation.

End of communal politics?

If this shift in thinking within BN holds and becomes new doctrine, it will usher in a substantive change in the country’s dominant political ideology; it will mark a move away from communal politics that has been the hallmark of Malaysia’s political system. This will reprise the spirit of the founding father of UMNO, Onn Jaafar, who had advocated an UMNO that was open to all communities, not just Malays. As his thinking proved too unpopular and ahead of its time, Onn Jaafar left UMNO in 1951 and since then, the idea of multiracial parties struggled to take hold. What came close was a power-sharing model embracing the major ethnic communities - initially in the three-party Alliance, which then expanded in 1973 to become the BN.

Like the Alliance, the idea of BN was still anchored on communal politics, but unlike it, the BN aspired to be a single non-communal party one day. In this sense, Tengku Adnan’s idea of a unified non-communal BN was not really a revelation. Still it showed that that “one day” for BN to realise its own vision may have come. The difference is that such a transformation and its timing are being forced by circumstances rather than by BN’s own choice.

A BN-PR Alliance?

There is still much to be sorted out, though. For instance, will the deracialisation of politics, if it comes about, be just at the BN level, or will it permeate through all the 13 communal parties that comprise BN? For instance, will UMNO open its doors to all races and not just Malays and Bumiputras and thus revive Onn Jaafar’s radical proposal to transform itself from the United Malays National Organisation into the United Malaysians National Organisation? Similarly, will the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) cease to exist as we know them?

Besides these issues that have to be resolved within BN itself, there is another layer of existential questions surrounding Najib’s post-election proposal for national reconciliation. A transformed BN that is no longer a coalition but a single party will in theory make it difficult to expand to embrace the PR parties - should this be part of the strategic consideration.

But the early signs point to a rejection by the PR parties of joining BN. Let’s say a scenario emerges in which BN exists as a single party while PR remains as a three-party coalition: Will a new model then emerge in which BN and PR converge as a new and larger two-party alliance – in the name of national reconciliation?

These are obviously tough questions that are not likely to be attempted, much less resolved - at least in the near term. But they have to be contemplated if the country’s leaders are serious about change and reconciliation. Malaysia, post-GE13, is clearly at a critical juncture.

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