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One Year Later: Has Malaysia Changed?

By Adrian Tan

SYNOPSIS

A year has passed since Pakatan Harapan won the 14th Malaysian general election on a platform calling for reforms. The earlier euphoria has given way to a realisation of a long and challenging road ahead for the government. PH needs some victories to regain its momentum.

COMMENTARY

WHEN PAKATAN Harapan (PH) won its historic and surprising victory in the May 2018 Malaysian general election (GE14), many were quick to say that this will bring in an era of change. It has been a year since the new government led by Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over power. Has Malaysia changed?

Has the government been able to execute its electoral manifesto, which was one of reforms? Looking at domestic developments since GE14, it has not been easy for the PH government, and many a time, this is not for want of trying. Four key areas reveal the immense challenges facing this government.

Reform Is Never Easy

Whoever says reform is easy is likely never involved in carrying it out. In the case of Malaysia, it is easy to blame the Barisan Nasional (BN) governments of yesteryear for the many problems facing the country, and much of the criticism is valid.

However, many of these problems are complex with no quick solutions. Take for instance the issue of corruption. Former Prime Minister Najib Razak's ongoing trial for alleged misdeeds in the 1MDB scandal will take up much of the government's bandwidth. But what is needed is a systematic clean-up of the system; for it to be

sustained, there has to be a strict enforcement of the anti-corruption laws. In addition, leaders must set the correct example for the rest of the country.

Two incidents come to mind – the backtracking of the government over the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Rome Statute (of the International Criminal Court) reveal the challenge of balancing reforms with the potential political costs.

Besides raising questions over decision-making within the government, the recent episodes created opportunities for the Opposition and other segments of society to put pressure on PH. For those who had pushed for these reforms, it must have been demoralising to see the government backtracking on its commitment. This will ultimately impact on the reform push by the PH.

Coalition Politics – Work in Progress

The coalition partners in PH were united in their desire to bring Najib down and to remove the BN from power. They succeeded, but that was the easier part. Governing effectively is never going to be easy given the length of time that BN had remained in power.

Mahathir, with his experience and prestige, has helped to stabilise the coalition, but he is 94. Coalition politics however, have been complicated. Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) saw a bruising party election in late 2018 that resulted in wounds that may not fully heal. Anwar's eldest daughter Nurul Izzah has resigned from senior positions in the party and government.

Mahathir's Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) is trying to grow itself by attracting defectors from UMNO and other parties but this has led to tensions with the coalition partners and other allies. Amanah has its own headache – how to become a party that can have relevance to the cause of the coalition? The Democratic Action Party (DAP) has kept generally quiet in public but it has to be concerned by the tensions within the coalition.

Succession Politics

One of the key questions in the minds of many Malaysians will have to be "Will Anwar take over from Mahathir?" Anwar has played a patient game and he has constantly expressed his support for Mahathir but he has also made it clear that he expects to take over as PM.

Mahathir has also been careful with what he says about succession. But as time passes, and as we approach the end of 2019, speculation will naturally increase. Every single remark or action by the two men will be scrutinised and interpreted. If things do not go according to plan, at least from Anwar's perspective, what does that mean for coalition politics? Will the coalition be able stay together?

And if things do go according to plan, and Anwar takes over as PM, is it going to be an easy ride for him? Much will depend on the state of play in national politics as well as coalition politics at the point of the proposed transition. Mahathir will not be an easy

act to follow. That said, Anwar is likely the only one who can hold the coalition together post-Mahathir.

UMNO and BN – Still in the Race

UMNO's cooperation with the Islamist party PAS appears to have borne some fruit. At the same time, UMNO has kept the BN concept alive even as its two traditional allies, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), continue to meander.

Threats to leave BN are heard but in reality, MCA and MIC have few options. It is hard to see them moving to PH or even creating a third force in Malaysian politics. Staying with UMNO in a BN looks like the plan for now.

For UMNO, cooperation with PAS will come at a price. What can UMNO say or do to differentiate itself from PAS? Looking at the recent by-elections, by choosing candidates who were seen as acceptable to PAS, and motivated by a desire to return to power, UMNO may be inadvertently transforming itself into a different party, away from its traditional role as a Malay nationalist party.

Uncertainty will be the Norm

PH will need some victories to regain momentum. To be fair to PH, it is trying hard to implement its electoral manifesto. The fundamental dilemma is this – to win the next GE, PH must govern in a way that will win them votes, but that could mean that some of its reform promises have to be sacrificed on the altar of political necessity.

But sacrificing these promises will be seen as betrayal by some of its supporters. In truth, pragmatism, rather than idealism, will have to be paramount but yet, idealism was a key factor that drove PH to win the GE14.

The year ahead will be challenging and uncertainty will persist. There is no quiet day in Malaysia with the latest issue about the relationship between the government and the Malaysian royalty. Ultimately, PH will have to decide what it truly wants and focus on it.

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