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The Rush for Survival: New Catharsis in Malaysian Politics?

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Malaysian politics is at yet another crossroads. The ruling coalition fears losing power. Yet the opposition alliance is in no position to take over. New tensions are emerging on both sides. What will emerge out of this new catharsis?

THE CLOCK has started ticking.

Malaysia's key political parties in the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) are rushing against time to win back the ground. After losing much support at the March 8 general election last year, the prospect of being thrown out of power at the next one is real. Survival is now the name of the game, and the BN is in a hurry to secure it, as if elections are just around the corner. Such are the tectonic shifts in the political landscape that the parties are still reeling from the aftershocks. An uncertain future lies ahead.

Three key allies in BN representing the main ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians -- are in varying degrees of existential angst. They are reacting to this either with unprecedented reform (UMNO); a power struggle (the Malaysian Chinese Association, MCA); or in continued self-denial (Malaysian Indian Congress, MIC). There are also other coalition partners who are in no better state. But all of them know one thing: Their positions are far from secure.

Unless UMNO succeeds in turning itself around and inspiring the others to buck up quickly, the BN is under serious threat and far from ready to go into any election, should one be called soon. Yet, the combined opposition, the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) led by Anwar Ibrahim whose emergence triggered this state of flux in the political system, is in no better state either. In fact, the Pakatan seems to be in a worse shape than when it started with great promise.

Opposition Just as Bleak

Anwar's People's Justice Party (PKR), the lynchpin of the three-party Pakatan opposition alliance, is

proving to be fragile -- even as it draws in new blood at the top with the entry of former leaders from UMNO and MCA. Its Chinese-based ally, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), is in constant ideological tension with the Islamist PAS, despite some valiant attempt by both to paper over their differences. PAS, once the most cohesive of the three opposition partners, is also showing signs of serious internal strain.

A fissure that was supposed to have gone has suddenly resurfaced -- between those who want to forge Malay and Muslim unity with UMNO and those who want to remain loyal to the opposition. Out of the blue, PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz pushed for a party emergency meeting ala UMNO and MCA to resolve once and for all its own leadership issue. What's even shocking is his suggestion that the party president, Hadi Awang, who is leaning toward reconciliation with UMNO, has to go.

This new tension within PAS, if not handled well, is bound to shake the stability of the Pakatan coalition. Although the opposition alliance has captured five (later reduced to four) of the 13 states in the country, such internal tensions will undermine public confidence in its ability to run an effective government should they come to power at the next general election. Pakatan can even unravel if its glue, Anwar, loses his second sodomy trial and is jailed.

Meanwhile, the BN-led ruling coalition is claiming to be winning back the ground across all ethnic groups. Note the song and dance over the BN/UMNO victory in the recent Negri Sembilan by-election -- before Prime Minister Najib Razak toned it down with a warning that one swallow does not a summer make. If it is true that the BN is winning back the support of all ethnic groups, it means Najib's unifying slogan of 1Malaysia may be working with the minorities. Still, it may be too early to say that the flowback will be replicated in a general election.

What the opposition should worry about is if voters are beginning to be weary of Pakatan as well. For if that is the case, UMNO and the BN can influence the flowback of support by determining the pace of their own reforms. The more reformist they become, the more attractive the ruling coalition will be. But can the BN change, and fast enough?

Key Factors for a Turnaround

For BN to make an effective turnaround, a few things have to work: First, UMNO's reform drive, which Najib pushed through with ease, must not falter. Second, UMNO's key partners, MCA and MIC, must follow UMNO's drumbeat of reform and change without fail. Third, BN as a whole must click to prevent a collective slide into oblivion. This can be tough, especially when complications can come in unexpected ways.

In the week that Najib pushed for reforms within UMNO, MCA grabbed headlines with a new power struggle that would only turn off an already disillusioned Chinese ground. UMNO was already under pressure from its own ranks to bypass MCA and MIC to reach out directly to the Chinese and Indian communities. UMNO leaders had dropped big hints that they would be forced to review the BN consensus on power-sharing if MCA and MIC leaders lose the support of their communities. UMNO will not want to be out of power by virtue of the weaknesses of its ethnic allies.

The upshot is that Najib was forced to step in and put pressure on MCA leaders to resolve their internal dispute quickly. Notice how surprisingly swiftly the two rivals -- Ong Tee Kiat and Chua Soi Lek -- made up within days of their dispute blowing up into the open. It is hard to believe that they had on their own volition suddenly decided to patch up. After UMNO and MCA, the next party to be shaken up is MIC. Expect Samy Vellu to finally call it quits -- in spite of his dogged clinging on to power.

What now?

Clearly, Malaysian politics is going through a new catharsis – this time on both sides of the political divide. Both the BN and Pakatan are in pain. The two-horse race to woo the *rakyat* is picking up steam. Whoever recovers faster will win federal power. If both coalitions reform earnestly enough to convince the voters that they are the ones deserving support, the ultimate winner will be the electorate as a whole. No doubt, a two-coalition system, with two sets of allies ready to rule, will be the best outcome for Malaysian politics since the earth-shattering changes of March 8 last year. But will the drift towards the opposition stay, or will the voters swing back to BN, as they tend to do at alternate elections?

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