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Time again for coalition to remake itself

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By Ooi Kee Beng

FORTY years ago, Penang, the only peninsular Malaysian state where non-Malays are in the majority, fell to a then opposition party, the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia.

With that upset, the Alliance, the ruling coalition of the day, went into crisis. Violence broke out in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur and the country experienced its worst racial riots ever. The first premier, Tunku Abdul Rahman, saw himself sidelined and edged out of power within a year.

Tun Abdul Razak - aided by his able deputy Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman - became the man tasked with the rebuilding of Malaysia.

A new deal was reached between the races. The Alliance coalition expanded into the Barisan Nasional (BN). The New Economic Policy came into being to aid Malay development. And Malaysia politics was curtailed through an Act of Parliament that forbade the debate of sensitive issues related to race and religion. A prerequisite for this new structure was Gerakan joining the BN.

Two generations of Malaysians have now lived through this 40-year-old arrangement, and the country's political economy has had to make do with its limitations.

The question Malaysians have faced for a long time was how and when the country could free itself from the strictures it placed on itself in the wake of 1969. These strictures have turned into a major problem as globalisation became a big challenge.

With the amazing shift of voter sympathy towards the opposition in the 12th general election on Saturday, Malaysia has turned a sharp corner.

With the fall of the Gerakan in Penang - trounced more thoroughly than anyone could have expected by the electoral alliance of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) - the BN that was formed through Gerakan's agreeing to become part of it must necessarily go into crisis the way its predecessor, the Alliance, did.

Slowly but surely, the reformist fervour of Gerakan had faded since it joined the BN in 1972.

It ended in weak leadership that Penang's outgoing chief minister Koh Tsu Koon came to be strongly associated with. For that, Tan Sri Koh and his party were punished.

In the process, the DAP finally took the trophy it had sought ever since its founding in 1965. It won Penang in style by taking every state and parliamentary seat it contested. Along with the PKR, it managed to gain a two-thirds majority in the state legislature. The BN's Chinese-based parties, Gerakan and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), were wiped out in the state.

The Indian revolt that provided the opposition parties with a mass impetus also caused the fall of Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).

With the practical elimination of the MIC, a major partner of Umno since the days of the Alliance, as well as the defeat of the Gerakan and MCA, the ruling coalition system must once again remake itself. A new deal has to be reached that must reverse the marginalisation of large segments of Malaysian society.

The 2008 voter revolt against the Abdullah administration has been strong, thorough and effective. Indeed, it came at a critical time, when many Malaysians had come to feel that the country's sorry governance was beyond redemption.

With this victory for their parties, the leaders of the DAP and PKR, Mr Lim Guan Eng and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim respectively - both of whom were sentenced on dubious grounds to long jail terms that effectively banned them from politics for long years - may now feel themselves publicly vindicated.

Also, with this sea change, the vibrant opposition that became a thing of the past with the formation of the BN now has a future again. Where former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim is concerned, the voter support shown for the opposition coalition of which he was the de facto leader paves the way for his return to direct political influence.

The severe losses suffered by the BN may very well mean that Datuk Seri Abdullah will meet the same fate as the Tunku, and also within a year of the general election.

Umno's party polls, due to be held at the end of this year, cannot but be a hotly fought affair with no holds barred. The man who once led the coalition so triumphantly to victory in 2004, but who oversaw its humiliation four years later, will not be treated leniently. He is bound to be held responsible for the debacle.

Eyes will now be on Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Datuk Seri Abdullah's deputy. Will he be up to the task of reforming Malaysia in ways required by the popular vote?

The BN lost support in this election largely over governance issues. Hopefully, this will provide Parliament and the government with the necessary impetus to solve long-standing ills such as endemic corruption, civil service incompetence, government wastage and cronyism. Datuk Seri Abdullah had promised to battle all these ills but he failed to do so.

In losing its two-thirds majority, the BN may now be forced to be more responsive to the wishes of Malaysians at large. Very little now stands in the way of a new deal being reached between a confident opposition and a humbled administration, if both sides are willing to reach a compromise. The goal would be to allow the country to transcend the limitations of the old deal and reverse the collateral damage it caused over the last 40 years.

A new balance of power has come into being. It remains to be seen how the rest of the crisis solution put in place after 1969 will be reformed in the light of this new balance. The BN, as it had existed until March 8, has now lost much of its justification. It lost four states vital to its power structure - Penang, Kedah, Selangor and Perak - in addition to Kelantan; and some of its component parties, including the MIC and Gerakan, have been crippled.

Like a play in search of an author, the BN is now a coalition in search of a *raison d'etre*.

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