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## Will UMNO see the light?

*The pressure is on the party  
to embrace non-Malays  
but events show  
that's not likely to happen*

By Ooi Kee Beng

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MALAYSIAN Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi resisted the inevitable for seven months, but finally agreed to descend from the country's political pinnacle.

His party's Supreme Council, getting more worried by the day at how badly his administration was managing the post-electoral battle against opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, finally threw in his towel for him.

With that, they also threw out the two-year transition plan that would have helped stabilise the party while it picked up widely-strewn pieces following the March 8 elections.

The United Malays National Organisation (Umno) will now be holding its elections next March, and Mr Abdullah will not be running for party president. Whoever gains the most support from Umno divisional delegates then will become the country's new Prime Minister.

Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that Mr Anwar will not succeed in toppling the Barisan Nasional (BN) government before then.

Umno is not able to escape the approaching period of infighting among its top leaders, and there seems to be more of them than had been the case since Umno was re-registered in 1988.

But whoever wins the war has to consider one important but sometimes forgotten aspect of Malaysian politics, and that is, that Umno, though dominant within the ruling coalition, cannot do without its allies.

Umno's rebuilding must occur in synchrony with BN's rejuvenation. In fact, the coalition's component parties will watch Umno's campaigning very closely. Should Umno choose to remain strongly Malay-centric, then the chances of the BN falling apart will increase.

Umno must therefore maintain party cohesion by projecting a new image of openness and flexibility towards multiracialism, and secularism as well. It has no choice on this matter if the point of its consolidation is to strengthen its hold on federal power.

The next leadership of Umno cannot afford to be fixated with Malay interests. It was after all such an attitude that lost the elections for its allies.

Indian voters, notorious for being loyal to the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) before March 8, turned their backs on the BN. This was followed very quickly by Chinese voters, and in the end by a sizeable number of Malay voters as well.

The Indian vote today is for oppositional Pakatan Rakyat to lose, not for BN to win. The same goes for the Chinese vote, though to a lesser extent. The resistance among non-Malays against supporting the BN is extremely stubborn, much more so than among the Malays.

And so, although Umno may think its main constituency is the Malay community, it has to swallow its pride and take a leaf out of Mr Anwar's more up-to-date manual, and learn how to win and retain non-Malay support as well.

That is a tall order, indeed, judging from how the BN under Umno's leadership has been handling matters over the last few months. Its worst blunders have involved the jailing of non-Malays.

After the pivotal demonstration by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) on Nov 25 last year, the government locked up five of the movement's leaders without trial, under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

This contributed in no small measure to the defeats suffered by the BN in the elections. The antipathy generated by the government's move was still evident when a group of Hindus recently attended Mr Abdullah's open house following the fasting month and demanded the release of these detainees.

The jailing of opposition politician Teresa Kok and journalist Tan Hoon Cheng in September, though only for a short time, angered not only a majority of Malaysians, but many Christians as well. The anti-ISA lobby has seized its chance and is advising Mr Abdullah to abolish the legislation and acquire at least that achievement as his legacy.

Blogger Raja Petra Kamaruddin was also locked away without trial, but his role is of another calibre in this context. He had been attacking Umno from angles that non-Malays try their best to avoid, taking on the Deputy Prime Minister and his wife, and criticising the hypocrisy of religious leaders.

The inability of the arms of government to think through their course of action before acting reveals a lack of internal dialogue and discussion. After all, a post-mortem has yet to be held by the BN on the results of the general elections.

The BN is therefore lagging far behind the PR in responding to the worries of non-Malays. An encouraging change in Malaysian politics lies in the fact that any attempt by a politician to win wide support from one's own ethnic community now requires an inclusive element so as not to alienate Malaysians who are not of that community.

In such times, race-based parties are swimming against the current. They have to walk the thin line between ethnocentrism and multiracialism. A recent survey may show in principle that a small majority of Malaysians has not lost confidence in the BN model of inter-racial representation, but the credibility of BN's individual members has never been lower.

***The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. His latest book is *Lost in Transition: Malaysia under Abdullah*.***