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The Pakatan tide continues

**The party has survived a rocky start
after the Kuala Terengganu by-election:**

By Ooi Kee Beng
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ELECTION results cannot help but provide an exhausted citizenry relief from the suspense of the weeks preceding Polling Day. More than that, they are a reality check on the political state of affairs.

That is one reason why polls are so captivating, and when carried out fairly, they also leave all involved on all sides with the feeling that they did take part in something grand and meaningful.

Naturally, a by-election tells much less than what a general election would and the consequences of the results are infinitely less imposing.

That is true for normal times. But these are not normal times in Malaysia.

The Kuala Terengganu by-election on Saturday took place right in the middle of a protracted battle between the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) and the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) that started even before the latter was properly formed on April 1 last year.

There appears to be no end to this war of wits and the weaving of intrigues. Perhaps that is the point of a democracy — to institutionalise inherent differences and thus, defuse their potential to cause violence.

Buoyed by their success in last year's March 8 elections, and indeed as if in answer to a calling, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) could not but make one more attempt at forming a coalition that could finally challenge the BN for federal power.

With PAS' success in Kuala Trengganu, the baby that is the PR has survived its shaky infancy.

BN has now lost two by-elections in a row, and badly at that. The first was when former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was elected back into Parliament in August last year.

With these coming after the drubbing that the government suffered in the general elections, and if we consider how consistently BN won four by-elections during Mr Abdullah Badawi's first mandate period, it is hard for anyone to continue claiming that the tide has not changed for BN.

However, what the PR needs to be cognizant of is exactly the fact that tides do change. No doubt the three member-parties of PR will ride the present gush in their favour for as long as they can. Malaysians can only hope that it will wash away much that has gone wrong with BN and put into place institutions and values that will take the country into a new stage of concerted development.

To steal one of United States President-elect Barack Obama's lines — who does not do that nowadays? — we may be witnessing a rebirth of inter-ethnic cooperation taking place in Malaysia. The first birth took place in the '50s under Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, and the second happens now, half a century later.

Identifying the differences between the two conceptions and the two births may provide a roadmap for how the new-born consensus is to be nurtured.

Now, when the Islamist party actually won over 3,000 votes more than it did 10 months ago in the Kuala Trengganu parliamentary constituency, its members cannot avoid learning at the nation-wide level that non-Muslims are not necessarily going to vote against it.

If non-Muslims are indeed part of its potential constituency, then there is an understanding that dialogues are necessary.

Pakatan Rakyat's achievement in its nine-month existence is this: Being able to sell the idea to otherwise race-fixated Malaysians that they are not each other's enemies and their battles do not have to be fought by proxy through race-based political parties.

This is not a new product. It was sold once upon a time to Malaysians in the twilight years of British domination of Malaya by Tunku Abdul Rahman. But much has changed since then. That was no longer the product that BN had been selling over the last couple of decades.

The most important change is the fact that the country has been ruled for 50 years by an increasingly powerful BN that grew more corrupt, more callous, more uncaring and less competent. It had become a goal unto itself.

With hubris eating up BN credibility and the population hollowed of hope, the tide turned and a rebirth of inter-ethnic cooperation became necessary.

“Enough is enough” is thus the common sentiment through which the two conceptions took place. As in March last year, Chinese and Indians voted in Kuala Trengganu for a Malay-based party outside BN’s framework.

That had been BN’s trump card. It has now lost that monopoly. Tides ebb and babies age. BN waited too long to reinvent itself.

Nations live on a diet of successive myths. Once one is gone, another is adopted. The latest myths to go are that Malaysia’s fate is synonymous with BN’s fate, and the well-being of the Malay community is dependent on the well-being of the once-dominant United Malays National Organisation.

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