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**Back to Basics:
How to combat the crisis of
credibility rocking Malaysia's
central governing bodies**

**By Ooi Kee Beng
For Weekend TODAY | Dated 22 November 2008**

The record-high support for Barisan Nasional in the 2004 elections under its new chairman Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was a loud sigh of relief coming from the Malaysian voter freed from the authoritarian Mahathir period.

In hindsight, however, this relief was accompanied by a hope against hope that the system would reform itself, and that the damage done to the country's institutions could somehow be reversed ... if only the top man wished for it.

Such optimism on the part of the Malaysian public hid a conformist attitude born of sustained authoritarian rule, a social laziness and an unwillingness to take personal responsibility for the sorry state of governance in the country.

It was easier to hope than to act.

However, the system under Abdullah did not reform itself in any remarkable way. He did make a few positive gestures in the beginning, but the path to serious reform required insight, vision and will. He did not have enough of these qualities, and whatever improvement came under his watch was overshadowed by continued deterioration in most areas.

What made it impossible for the system to reform itself was the fact that the key institutions badly damaged during the Mahathir years were not only the judiciary, the police, the civil service and the universities. Worst of all, Umno itself — the dominant party — was perhaps the most damaged of them all.

And so, when street demonstrators were water-cannoned last year, and activists put away without trial, many gave up hope in the system's ability to reform itself.

It was then the Malaysian voter stopped being lazy, it was then he stopped being conformist and it was then he began to take responsibility and vote, not for reform as such, but against those who had failed to carry out reforms.

And so, Barisan Nasional secured record-low support in the 2008 elections.

The trend towards reform is now more obvious, even to Umno hardliners. But there is little to suggest that sufficient change is forthcoming.

No nominee for the top posts in the coming party elections can be taken seriously as a possible agent of change. "Change" is the magic word at the moment. But what change is required?

MAINTAINING A BALANCE

One way of understanding the situation is to remind ourselves that politics is always local, and that it is always personal in essence. The federal government's right to rule relies on the balance it can keep between local and federal interests.

When federal interests become paramount and local interests are ignored; or when federal interests become blatantly partisan and the interests of some particular locality or community are manifestly favoured above others; or when federal interests have been hijacked by the personal interests of those in power — it is when one of these is the case that federal politics returns to being local. The right of the central to represent the local is taken back by the voter.

Once the legitimacy of the central to represent the local is gone, it is not easily regained. Once the trust in Umno and its allies is gone, politics descends to its foundations, and central power must be rebuilt in stages, from the bottom up. There is no shortcut, although the temptation to find one will be strong among those who fear the loss of power.

A pattern is emerging in Malaysia where different states will either be ruled by different parties, or by different coalitions of parties. At the moment, only two coalitions seem viable, but sooner or later, local interests — being so varied from area to area and from state to state — will seek new configurations of power which may express themselves in a rainbow of coalitions. State politics does not have to be a perfect reflection of central politics.

A federation is an acknowledgement of the great divisions that exist within it. These divisions tend to geographical, and it is a healthy sign that political preferences in Malaysia are becoming more and more varied, geographically.

With the central power losing legitimacy, the sociopolitical dynamics below that are now badly reflected at the top move to change the structure above it. It is to be expected that the top will try to suppress these forces seeking to change it. But the top will do that only if it thinks it can succeed. If it realises that it cannot possibly reverse the trend, it will change along with it in order to survive, hoping that in adjusting and surviving, it can at least retain some influence.

Seen this way, what is happening in Malaysia is a crisis of credibility in the central power and its institutions. In such a situation, politics returns to basics, also in the geographical sense. Localism grows in strength and seeks to alter the federal structure towards being a better expression of itself.

The challenge facing those who wish for power at the federal level is to win legitimacy by finding ways to represent local interests of as many states and areas as possible, to find the right extent to which they should unite these interests and to which level they should not, and convincing all involved that the total they create is larger than the sum of all the parts.

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