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Imagine no Umno-MCA symbiosis

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The crisis within the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) is different from earlier ones because, no matter how it is solved, not having an inspiring message for the young is a greater and more damning one.

This goes for the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) as well.

The fate of the two is inextricably intertwined.

Fifty-seven years ago, the fortunes of Umno and MCA took a quantum leap. In the municipal elections in Kuala Lumpur on Feb 16, 1952, leaders of the two parties at the municipal level decided to cooperate against the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP). In the process, they managed to beat their opponents soundly and the Alliance was born.

Up to that point, these parties - each on its own - did not have the wide appeal nor the internal unity needed for them to claim the right to represent the masses. It was the symbiosis between the two that convinced the British that they now had conservative, anti-communist allies who were sufficiently stable, and to whom they could hand over the lucrative colony of Malaya.

Seen in a longer perspective, what this historical conflation of power did was to lock Malaysian politics into an unbreakable racial discourse. Though challenged every now and then, this grid has remained in place.

And so, the history of Malaysian politics can be studied through the relative power between the two. Many compromises were made within the context of this relationship.

HISTORY OF COMPROMISES

The MCA under Mr Tan Cheng Lock was from the start more prone to work with Mr Onn Ja'afar's IMP. After the success of the cooperation between the MCA and Umno in the 1952 municipal election, the Alliance could project itself as the effective shortcut to independence. The coalition attracted support, and Mr Onn was deserted by his allies, which up to that point included key leaders of the MCA.

Compromises made between the two parties and the British allowed for sensitive issues such as the status of vernacular languages, the status of Islam, the special position of Malays (which included the unique compromise of defining that community in the Constitution itself), and citizenship rights, to be resolved.

An unsympathetic view of this history of compromises would claim that they failed to satisfy anyone in the longer term. The democratic structure of the Malaysian political system was bound over time to work against the attempt to give concessions made by political parties the status of final solutions.

After a sizeable number of Chinese voters deserted the MCA in the 1969 elections, the Alliance fell apart. The MCA emerged a much weakened partner.

Although it is still generally seen as the second party within the extended coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), its status as Umno's peer dissipated properly with MCA president Tan Siew Sin's resignation as Finance Minister in February 1974.

This followed his failure to convince Premier Abdul Razak Hussein to have him succeed Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, who died on Aug 2, 1973, as Deputy Prime Minister, or as Second Deputy Prime Minister.

The rise of a Malay-centric government, increasingly institutionalised through the New Economic Policy, was too focused a force to be turned.

A new class of Umno leaders with new ideas about the state's role in managing economic development could not be denied.

The BN proved a stable configuration, largely through its ability to centralise power and weaken federalism, especially throughout Dr Mahathir Mohamad's long administration. The MCA's role became less and less prominent, and the dominance of Umno became an accepted fact of Malaysian politics.

With the retirement of Dr Mahathir, and with power at the top being wielded by a less focused personality, the sad state to which the lesser parties of the BN had been reduced became evident. Umno itself had given way to a class of leaders more concerned about their own positions and their own power base than with envisioning good governance for the country.

Denial of the situation continued throughout the Abdullah Badawi period. With no governing party able to project optimism and hope, voters, especially in the northern states, decided to turn their backs on BN in the general election last year.

The situation today is that, aside from an Umno that manages to retain a stable rural base, other BN parties on the peninsula may already have postponed reforms too long.

Whatever parties like Gerakan, the Malaysian Indian Congress or MCA do to reinvent themselves, their chances of attracting members to their diminishing numbers of branches are small indeed.

With the Umno-MCA symbiosis dissipating in light of Umno's hegemony within BN, the closed-door compromises their relationship allowed in the past will be much harder to continue. — TODAY

The writer is a fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies. His latest book is Arrested Reform: The Undoing of Abdullah Badawi.