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POLITICS IN MALAYSIA  
**Consolidation of power takes centre stage**

By Ooi Kee Beng  
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NOW that Malaysian Premier Abdullah Badawi has inducted some respected people into his Cabinet, resistance from within the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) must be expected.

The new law minister Zaid Ibrahim has already been criticised for suggesting that the government apologise for its treatment of three judges in the late 1980s. Resistance from the sultans to the wavering will of the federal government has also prompted the newly appointed minister to hint at changes in state constitutions vis-à-vis federal power. Should the latter idea take concrete form, a fight between the central government and the sultans - as well as state governments now ruled by opposition parties - will be unavoidable.

Datuk Shahrir Samad, now Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, is facing months of hard work reforming - and perhaps dismantling - the country's complicated subsidy system. He has to do this without worsening popular sentiment against the Abdullah administration.

Datuk Seri Abdullah's right to continue leading Umno and the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) is being challenged on many fronts, and there is doubt as to whether he will last a full term.

His new Cabinet met mixed reactions. Some saw it as an attempt to improve governance as well as the ruling coalition's image. But others faulted Datuk Seri Abdullah for wishing to overstay his welcome, and several BN leaders have refused to accept minor positions in the new government.

All these problems surfaced in part because the Prime Minister was trying to consolidate his weakened position in the aftermath of the March 8 general election. Unfortunately for him, not all in Umno are willing to equate consolidating his position to consolidating Umno's.

But consolidation, in fact, should be the name of the game for both the winners and losers in the elections.

Of the BN's component parties in peninsular Malaysia, three were practically wiped out: Gerakan, the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the People's Progressive Party. Another, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), won only 15 of the 40 seats it contested. Except for Umno, then, all these parties face extinction or irrelevance at the national level.

Much thus depends on Umno. The question is no longer whether BN will regain its former prominence but what form BN will have to take to remain relevant as a model of government. Calls within Umno for Datuk Seri Abdullah's resignation stem from the desperate hope that a change in leadership will be the quickest way for the party to formulate a new game plan.

What is giving the opposition - Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) - much needed breathing space is the fact that the BN is so confused that it lacks the direction and the motivation to adapt to 'post-March 8' politics.

The three opposition parties are under pressure to keep cooperating as a group for as long as they can. Issues that may trip them are racial and religious in nature, such as reforming affirmative action programmes and the political role of Islam. But their differing ambitions may also pose a problem.

The DAP has hit a theoretical ceiling where voter support is concerned. It practically won all the constituencies in which it had some chance of making an impression. This means that it will now focus its energies on consolidating its position in the three states where it did well - Penang, Selangor and Perak - as well as in Kuala Lumpur, and on negotiating with its allies.

The same holds true for PAS, which would be as strong as the DAP is now if it had performed as well in Terengganu and Perlis as it did in Kelantan and Kedah. For the time being, it will prefer to secure its electoral spoils to playing the role of opposition at the federal level.

PKR, on the other hand, has a different self-image. It came into being in direct opposition to Umno and as a means for former premier Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to resist political eradication. This genesis entails the ambition of replacing Umno with the help of a swing among Malay voters. In principal, this swing has no limit.

PKR's sights are therefore set on federal power, with power at the state level merely a means to that end. This focus of PKR may cause problems for its partners.

For the Federation of Malaysia as a whole, the political landscape has certainly been transformed. With a central monolithic power no longer existing, Malaysians may have to start imagining their country to be a federation both in reality as well as in name.

Power in Malaysia now is geographically segmented and distributed between the centre and the states. This is not a situation Umno and the ruling coalition are accustomed to. They probably won't adjust to it without a fight.

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