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Malaysian politics

Fear of Malay disunity: Will 'bogeyman' save Umno?

By Ooi Kee Beng

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SINCE the formation of the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) in 1946, the notion of 'Malay unity' has been central to political rhetoric in Malaysia.

It was in response to the conditions needed for the British to grant Malaya independence in 1957 that the consociational system of race-based parties - the Alliance solution - came into being. This system was expanded in 1974 when the Barisan Nasional (BN) was formed, and further consolidated Umno's dominance over its coalition partners.

Umno managed through these arrangements to secure a relatively solid voter base for more than 60 years. The unstated bogeyman in its strategy was 'Malay disunity'. The reasoning was that the survival of Malays depended on their unity, and the only body that could guarantee that unity was Umno.

With the rise of a viable opposition coalition and the weakening of major BN component parties in the March 8 general elections, this reasoning has been challenged. Malay political sympathies are now effectively split three ways - among Umno, the Islamist Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), and former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). The last two are allied against Umno.

For Umno, this three-way split of Malay support has become a greater threat to its power than even the fight between its Team A and Team B in the late 1980s. The new threat is ontological and calls into question the connection between Malay unity and Malay survival.

It is no surprise then that Umno quickly sent out feelers after election night to PAS to lure it to the negotiating table: Malay unity and Muslim unity must be redeemed. Some in PAS' leadership took the bait.

This has led to divisions within PAS, with the party's spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat warning his followers of the 'Umno trap'. He was referring to the way Umno played on PAS' weakness in the 1970s when the latter was part of BN.

PAS enjoyed unprecedented success at the recent polls, thanks in large part to the anti-BN sentiments on the ground. Its leaders and members are therefore, by and large, reluctant to bridge the divide among Malays, for both ethical and strategic reasons.

But the party's leadership was recently taken over by reformist professionals, and the temptation for sidelined veterans and religious leaders to seek another path to power is strong.

In any event, Umno has with one smart move - proffering a hand to PAS - not only staged its commitment to the old dictum about the centrality of Malay unity, it has also injured Datuk Seri Anwar's coalition. In the process, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi now appears stronger than he has been since before the elections.

Umno, however, remains disunited. First, there is growing polarisation among its followers. Some say the party should reform itself, change its style of governance and become less ethnocentric. But there are others who, under stress, are prone to insist, even more strongly than before, on the maxim that Malay survival depends on Malay unity.

Second, calls for Datuk Seri Abdullah's resignation were made immediately after the election results were known. Although these have become rarer since he announced that he would be retiring in the middle of 2010 and that Deputy Premier Najib Razak would be his successor, his leadership is still very much an issue.

Third, whether Umno admits it or not, its power is dependent on the commitment of its 13 much less powerful partners to the BN system. BN may be stronger than its weakest links, but it remains vulnerable to attack.

Who better to launch those attacks than Mr Anwar, the man who once seemed fated to become its leader? Indeed, his whole career since his sacking as deputy premier has been about assailing fortress Umno. His party, PKR, was formed for that purpose.

What is unique about that party is that it is multiracial in name and in ambition, but its top leaders are Malays. This last detail is what makes many Malaysians believe and hope that PKR has a bright future. Multiracialism proposed by non-Malays cannot but fail. It is a doctrine that can succeed in Malaysia only if members of the majority community are its most vocal proponents.

This makes PKR an eccentricity that Umno cannot tolerate. As long as it was a one-MP party (as was the case before March 8), it was but an irritant. It is now a 31-MP party leading a formidable coalition bent on replacing the BN.

But PKR is a young party, having grown recently as if on steroids. It is in need of much internal toughening. As long as it remains relatively weak, Umno's best chance of felling such an enemy is to go for its head.

And that is precisely what it is trying to do.

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