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Abdullah Badawi and the Malaysian “Perestroika”

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The reality of the seismic change that has occurred in Malaysian politics after March 8, 2008 may take a while to percolate. Now that the new Abdullah Badawi government has been formed, it may be opportune to pause and reflect on the medium and longer-term impact the 12th Malaysian General Election.

What has occurred in Malaysia may be likened to 7-8 points on the political Richter scale, that is, it has nudged the country closer to a genuine two-party (or two-coalition) system. This is a salutary development, which saw its initial spurts in the Reformasi Movement of the late 1990s sparked by the sacking and then incarceration of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. With Anwar in jail for six years, the UMNO-led government, after jettisoning Mahathir Mohamed, was able to co-op at least rhetorically some of the Reformasi agendas such its anti-corruption agenda.

The new UMNO leadership led by the mild-mannered, and relatively unsullied Abdullah Badawi was able to proffer this to the public with great success. Abdullah won a landslide election in 2004. However, four years of an Abdullah government hamstrung by insidious UMNO crony politics to which he himself succumbed proved to the electorate that an UMNO-led government was not going to do the job they wanted done. Furthermore, the chronic in-fighting in BN parties (UMNO, MCA, MIC) mortally debilitated even Pak Lah's best efforts, such as his softer and more reasonable foreign policy. A Mahathir firing potshots at him from the sidelines certainly did not help his tenure.

However, it was Abdullah's own ineptness at handling the plethora of issues that peppered his tenure to finally accounted for his egregious failure on March 8. He failed to fulfill his promise of reining in corruption in the highest of circles (the police, judiciary and other public institutions), while he himself was implicated in the Iraq oil-for-food scandal. The problem of poor governance was amply illustrated in the Port Klang Free Zone cost overruns of RM4.6 billion.

To compound matters, his son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin was known to be in cahoots with well-heeled business cronies and his deputy Najib Abdul Razak was indirectly implicated in the infamous Mongolian murder and alleged massive kickbacks from defence contracts. Worse, Abdullah wasn't able to handle or finesse the growing inter-faith fractures that plagued his tenure; instead he acted in an authoritarian fashion and resorted to the draconian ISA after the HINDRAF rally of November 25. Even a “Rose Parade” by family members to petition the release of detained husbands and fathers was also rudely crushed.

With hindsight the result was predictable although even the best among us could not have foreseen the massive swing votes of the electorate against the ruling parties and their candidates. In Selangor and the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur, the voters swung against the BN government by more than 20 per cent. In Penang, the swing was about 18 per cent. Even in Johor there was a significant 14 percent swing although this did not translate into many seats for the opposition. In Peninsular Malaysia, the BN actually lost the popular vote garnering only 49 per cent.

Overall, it lost its two-third majority in Parliament, making Abdullah the worst performing leader in the history of the ruling coalition. For the Opposition, a cross-over of 30 seats could now help it to form a government although I do not anticipate this happening in the near future. With the 2008 result, the new Malaysian political landscape is likely to be defined by three key features.

First, Malaysia is on the threshold of a two-party (or two-coalition) system, with the emergence of new coalition front, previously known as Barisan Alternative, but with preferred name of Barisan Rakyat (People's Front). Second, the Northeast Malay belt of Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah and possibly Perlis in the future have become de facto state-level two-party systems with PAS and UMNO as main contenders and PKR as the third party. Finally, the Multi-ethnic PKR, led by Anwar Ibrahim has taken center stage in the Barisan Rakyat (BR), holding the middle ground with 31 seats, and will be the lynchpin for a two-party coalition system in Parliament.

The notion of an alternative front to the ruling coalition is not new. In the 1960s, the Socialist Front (SF) was such a coalition proffering genuine alternative policies to that of the Alliance coalition. It was also anchored on a formula of multi-ethnic power sharing like the Alliance. The SF self-destructed when the radical Labour Party chose to boycott electoral politics which it dubbed as sham democracy. The current BR is a similar multi-ethnic coalition with an alternative “Malaysian Economic Agenda” counterpoised against the BN’s somewhat anachronistic New Economic Policy (NEP). Although the NEP was formally buried in 1990, it has remerged in multiple forms in federal and state levels and has been responsible for breeding corruption and cronyism.

In the next five years, the four new BR governments of Selangor, Penang, Kedah and Perak will have to demonstrate to their electorate that they can not only govern well but demonstrate the capacity and will to reform failing or bad existing policies of the erstwhile BN governments. The tricky part is that this has to be accomplished with some level of federal government cooperation. It is left to be seen if the BN at the federal level will choose to be obstructionist to the new state governments although this could not be done with impunity, as the public will also be monitoring events. In other words, obstructionism can be a two-edged sword earning public ire.

If Kelantan is a guide, the PAS government succeeded very well indeed in keeping UMNO at bay for 18 years in spite of continued attempts by the federal government to either wield the stick or offer the carrot of “development”. Paradoxically, the federal government have had to make good their promises whether UMNO won or lost, such as giving Kelantanese the new Universiti Kelantan Malaysia (UKM). This is on top of the medical and nursing schools of USM, which are already in Kubang Kerian.

Abdullah’s situation is not unlike that of Gorbachev in the collapsing Soviet Union, with arguably different nuances and in a somewhat different political context. Abdullah’s “glasnost” (political opening) was largely unintended and rode on the back of a vibrant civil society that had matured since the 1980s thanks to the emergence of a Malay middle class, a salutary effect of the NEP.

However, Abdullah’s own “perestroika” (reform agenda) proved to be an egregious failure and accounts for the current development. The jury may still be out on whether the new Abdullah government can be sustained for five more years. My guess is however long he may stay in the driver’s seat, it is obvious that others will be steering the wheel.

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