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Malaysia facing a crisis, but what else is new?

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By Ooi Kee Beng

A common refrain in Malaysia is that politics enters a critical period every ten years or so. But in truth, crises come to Kuala Lumpur (and now to Putrajaya) more regularly than that.

A speedy assessment may suggest the riots of 1969 to be the first crisis after independence in 1957, followed by conflicts within UMNO in the late 1970s, and then the inter-ethnic tensions that led to the detention of 106 Malaysians under the infamous *Operasi Lalang* in 1987 alongside the demise of the old UMNO and the sacking of top judges. Then came the 1997 financial crisis of course, developing a year later into the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the formation of the *Reformasi* movement. For the ruling coalition, this train of events led to shockingly bad electoral results in 1999.

According to this superficial schema, it is indeed time for another crisis. However, one should not forget all the other trying times that Malaysia has gone through in its fifty years of life. So even without looking at that pattern, we can be sure that a crisis is due.

For one thing, the country gained independence in the middle of an armed communist insurgency, and almost immediately tensions appeared within the ruling coalition. The 1960s was one long difficult period altogether, with preparations for the formation of Malaysia, the armed confrontation with Indonesia, the separation of Singapore, and finally the riots following general elections.

The 1970s was not a happy time either. In its eagerness to bring the country back to parliamentarianism and to discourage inter-ethnic flare-ups, unpopular laws were passed to curb freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and even parliamentary liberties. A controversial policy of affirmative action was passed amidst a strong shift in power towards Malay hegemony, and the retirement of the once popular Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra. The death of Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, the Home Affairs Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in August 1973, followed by the passing away of Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein in January 1976 destabilised the ruling party for quite a while.

Tun Mahathir Mohamed, after taking power in 1981 had therefore to consolidate his power throughout the 1980s, especially within UMNO. The economic depression of 1985-86 did not help. Recognizing the potential of Islamisation, he recruited the activist, Anwar Ibrahim. Mahathir succeeded in succumbing his enemies, and throughout the 1990s until his break with Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, he remained the uncontested leader of party and nation.

Besides Islamisation, which in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society, was bound to end in further disunity, Mahathir's formula for political success was to sell the vision that the

nation was actually heading upwards, and all present sacrifices would be unnecessary by the year 2020. And to help him postpone tensions, he created foreign bogeymen, which raise Malaysia's status in the eyes of small and weak countries.

The financial crisis hit Mahathir where it hurt most, as it did many other Asian countries. As if out of a magician's hat, he conjured monetary controls as a cure-all to pull the economy out of the doldrums and in the process vindicate his failures where governance was concerned.

In the process, he had to destroy the career and reputation of his erstwhile protégé, Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar did not go down easily, and managed to create perhaps the greatest crisis of recent years for the ruling coalition, the *reformasi* movement that inspired a whole new generation of activists of all races.

Seeing that his time was up, the aging Tun Mahathir solved the problems surrounding his retirement, such as the rise of the Islamist party and the split among the Malays, by choosing the uncontroversial and amiable religious scholar Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi to take his place.

Tired of conflicts and crises, Malaysians were very willing to give Abdullah a chance to prove his worth. His promises were after all the right ones for a new leader to make.

Over the last four years, many have become disillusioned with him. But to be fair, governing Malaysia is no easy task. After 50 years of crisis management consisting of half-answers, semi-solutions and sidestepping rethoric, the profound changes that Abdullah needed to make were too much – for him and for most other potential leaders.

Weighed down by the entrenched interests that come from politicians and political parties having been in power too long, armed with an arsenal of legislations and institutions that have outlived the crises they were meant to solve, challenged by an opposition that is basically divided, faced by voters neutered by the ruling coalition's gerrymandering, and supported by a discourse of inter-ethnic division, the establishment, as Abdullah quickly found out, is quite unchangeable.

Below this superstructure of tortuous and *ad hoc* governance, inter-community and inter-faith tension and economic inequity continued to grow. Four years into Abdullah's mandate, the lack of policies for dealing with these basic issues in a serious manner is now forcing subterranean discontent to surface in open dissent.

Seldom properly opposed, Malaysia's long-lived power structure has bred inertia. This conservatism naturally resists the reforms needed to clear Malaysian governance of the corruption, incompetence and conceit that are the legacy of 50 years of unfinished crises and frozen tensions. Lacking will and vision, the present administration has only been able to dabble in skin-deep – and easily reversible – tinkering of the system.

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He is the author of *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (ISEAS 2006).