

## MY SAY: Priming a third-generation Alliance

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

MY SAY

The Edge Malaysia - 08/30/2010

Much has been said about the Alliance or Perikatan as a political entity, and later Barisan Nasional (BN) as a pre-election pact, that dominated the Malayan-Malaysian scene even before independence was won. This is uniquely Malaysian, given that in most cases one hears of pacts after an electoral process, where political parties scramble to form a government with a comfortable majority. The most recent cases were in the UK and Australia.

Unlike a pre-election pact of the BN-type, the post-election version is somewhat more prone to splitting up whenever there are major disagreements on certain issues. In other words, they are more vulnerable to political uncertainties that could lead to a chaotic nation. By comparison, the BN version presents a more cohesive option despite the disagreements within the coalition from time to time. Unlike its predecessor — the three-party Perikatan — BN has to contend with more than 10 component parties representing very diverse political entities, ranging from ethnic-based to multiracial-based, and extending through the country.

The apparent wisdom to establish a pre-election pact emerged in part from the refusal of the British government to grant independence to Malaya after more than 400 years of colonial rule. It was after the establishment of Umno that the struggle for independence intensified under the stewardship of the late Dato' Onn Jaafar. Indeed, Umno served as a platform to fight and defend the rights of the locals and at the same time restore the rights and powers of the Malay sultanate.

It was also Umno that initiated the coalition that eventually led to Perikatan. The country's first general election in 1955 confirmed the uniqueness of a pre-election pact, when Perikatan won handsomely under the leadership of Malaysia's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. It embedded the notion of racial peace and unity and the spirit of give and take (*semangat bertolak ansur* or *berkongsi*) in the nation as a whole, especially to make greater political gains.

Unfortunately, by 1969, it became obvious that *semangat bertolak ansur* on political terms alone was insufficient. In the realm of economics, in particular, a clear divide was beginning to manifest itself and become disruptive. Post 1969 saw the emergence of an expanded Perikatan, renamed BN, under the tutelage of the second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak. The formation of BN into a larger coalition was necessary after taking into consideration the nation's greater diversity and complexity as a result of the entry of Sabah and Sarawak into Malaysia.

Some 53 years later, the economic disparities are still here and becoming more visible, not only inter-ethnically but also intra-ethnically. The New Economic Model, for example, noted that about 40% of Malaysian households live on a per capita income of less than RM1,500 a month. This percentage swells to 80% in terms of per capita income of less than RM3,000. Human Resources Ministry sources say 34% of the workforce earn less than RM700 a month, that is below the poverty line of RM720.

Such a trend could be potentially explosive unless it is quickly addressed and the income gap bridged. The challenge is clearly an enormous one. Perhaps, we need to turn to the wisdom that gave birth to Perikatan to foster a genuine give-and-take and sharing spirit despite Umno being more dominant than the rest, politically speaking.

This is more urgent now as the once vibrant *semangat bertolak ansur* and *berkongsi* loses steam, thus creating more uncertainties for the future of the country. Sensitivities are not longer respected, ironically, in an attempt to pursue competing interests and create political mileage at various levels, even at the expense of the whole. In other words, the drift is increasingly towards the vulnerabilities long associated with a post-election coalition. Matters are made worse when those who are economically dominant lose the magnanimity to exhibit enough *semangat bertolak ansur* and *berkongsi* as the key ingredient to pull forward towards a more equitable, peaceful and sustainable society.

In fact, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak made a somewhat similar call when opening the Chinese Economic Congress early this month. "Our faith in Malaysia requires a long-term investment in the future. Through these genuine partnerships [with other communities], we can attain our goal towards equitable distribution of the nation's wealth. We must do this if we are to achieve our potential and sustain the progress and prosperity we have enjoyed thus far," he said. Malaysians need to guard against the prevailing attitude of the winner takes all, at times shamelessly (mis)using Malaysia as a reasoning facade.

Moving forward, let us see what we can learn from Bill Gates and Warren Buffett who reportedly desire to "attack today's problems with today's money", a philosophy that both of them subscribe to. Correspondingly, they believe that the next generation's wealth should be used to address the next generation's needs. Their

"Giving Pledge" initiative has already received generous responses from high-profile donors and if everyone on the Forbes 400 wealthiest Americans list took part, an estimated US\$600 billion could flow to US charities.

Malaysia may not have philanthropists as well endowed as Gates and Buffett, but that is missing the point. The Giving Pledge initiative is about *semangat tolak ansur* and *berkongsi*; it is about giving back beyond short-term party politicking. It could well be a version of Perikatan founded on economics rather than politics. Like the political version mooted by the stronger political component in the interests of the majority, an economic version could be forged to ensure a future that is sustainable and peaceful.

If this approach works as a political formula, why not an economic one, provided the same spirit of sharing and give and take is adhered to as in the past? Sadly, this is what is missing today, to the extent that our independence could be seriously compromised.

As we celebrate our 53rd Merdeka day, maybe there is no better time to put this thinking into action and start building the next generation of Perikatan, albeit an economic one. Its success holds great promise for the generations to come.

\* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at [vc@usm.my](mailto:vc@usm.my)

[Terms & Conditions](#)