

MY SAY: Think of others, please

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Article

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Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who passed away on Aug 9, wrote last year: "One people now have two states, two prisons who don't greet each other. We are victims dressed in executioners' clothing." He should know because he spent many years in exile writing poems dedicated to the struggle of his people. Darwish (meaning a pure, spiritual wandering person in Arabic) later reportedly became heartbroken about the internal strife plaguing his community.

But Darwish is not alone. Partisan politics, when carried to the extreme, has a way of causing a similar divisive impact on people of the same country, community and even family. While some may thrive on this, and are far from being broken-hearted, many others are sensitive about the long-term consequences of such narrow and banal politicking.

In the words of second prime minister Tun Abdul Razak: "We Malaysians of all races must dedicate ourselves to one national aim. We can express that in a single word 'unity'" (Aug 20, 1970).

However, of late, that single word has seemed a little elusive. Indeed, long after the 12th general election, the internal strife has seemed to worsen by the hour. Yes, one people with many different states, each imprisoned by his own myopic world, as it were. Trite attacks and counter-attacks have gone far beyond the borders of decency. Rarely is there any meaningful meeting of minds, even as the nation continues to bleed as a result. Not that this is the best of times, but unfortunately, it does not end there. The recent by-election in Permatang Pauh, by all accounts, seems to have worsened even further the internal strife.

If it is any consolation, it looks like all elections tend to bring about some sort of internal strife. Be it in Britain, Ukraine, Zimbabwe or Thailand, internal strife of varying severity is fast becoming the new hallmark of the grand experiment called democracy.

The recent US primaries (and the upcoming November US presidential campaign, too) give ample examples. A case in point was during the opening of the Democrats' 2008 presidential nominating convention last month, where Hillary Clinton was said to have acknowledged that there had been bad blood during the primary season.

A recent poll allegedly showed that 30% of her supporters across the US have indicated that they would vote for the Republican candidate, a third party, or no one. She also declared that too much was at stake for the party to remain divided. But now that the little-known governor of Alaska Sarah Palin is beginning to flex her muscles as the vice-presidential candidate for the Republican Party, the division could indeed sharpen.

Much more could be said for Zimbabwe where the two presidential candidates have been bitter rivals for years. Reportedly, the incumbent president Robert Mugabe, who has ruled the country since independence from Britain in 1980, has no intention of letting the opposition rule in his lifetime. A hero in Zimbabwe's liberation, he is now forced into a precarious power-sharing deal with his bitter arch-opponent Morgan Tsvan-girai, in a bid to avoid further political and economic turmoil. Whether the internal discord can be healed is still uncertain.

In Thailand, newly picked Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat is already facing a group of rebels from within his own party, who are weary of him being a mere puppet of Thaksin Shinawatra, the ousted maverick Thai prime minister. Again, chances are that the internal strife will not cease despite a bloody street battle, prompting the declaration of a state of emergency that has since been lifted. The internal strife that has gripped Thailand long before the 2006 coup will persist. One people, two states.

Whatever the outcome, the damage done will have a long-lasting impact on the lives of the majority of the population. Many of them, like Darwish, are equally inspired by the vision of reconciliation. Like Darwish, they too reckon that this is possible "on the land of love and peace".

In one of his latest poem, *Ibtisam Barakat* or *Think of others* (published this year), Darwish, among others, penned: "As you conduct your wars, think of others. Don't forget those who want peace." Regrettably, for the most part, "those who want peace" are often marginalised in the mad rush for partisan political interest. It is always the end that justifies the means.

If this is what political process in a democracy has degenerated into, then it is time this experiment in democracy be thoroughly reviewed. It is no use to go on pretending that it works just because a few people get elected in the process. After all, when everything else is forced to change in tandem with the sweeping tide of globalisation, why then should the politics of "divide and rule" — producing a version of Darwish's one people, two states — be an exception? Never mind if it is disguised as democracy, we are still "victims dressed in executioners' clothing".

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