



*By Malik Imtiaz Sarwar*

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I do not think I am alone in feeling that this country is in need of a serious overhaul. Sweeping reform, of a nature far deeper than the superficial changes conceived by consultants to seduce voters, is critical to our continued survival. If voter sentiment at the last general election is any indication, I think I am similarly not alone in believing that a change of government is in order.

I am guided to this conclusion not by dint of any admiration for those currently in Pakatan Rakyat (PR). Although admitted, there are individuals among them for whom I have a great deal of respect, this in itself is not a reason for change. The matter is addressed rather by reference to the seeming inability of Barisan Nasional (BN) at the present time to form the kind of government this country needs.

It is not very difficult to prove this proposition: the BN is held by its component parties and their members, in particular UMNO. In as much as some within the BN may wish to push the envelope on reform, they are subject to those who shape influence with these parties.

Sadly, these influences seem to be driven by the belief that the ends justify the means. It is for this reason that painfully sectarian communal politics and the attendant inflammatory race and religious posturing are still very much a part of our lives despite this obviously being counter to the interests of us all. Repeated pleas to reconsider the value of such politics is met

with hostility or simply ignored.

Their impact on the landscape is undeniable. Constant pandering to the politics of race and religion has resulted in grave consequences. Our country has been left terribly weakened, its institutions in seeming disarray, with no clear direction as to how to restore things to the way they once were.

At the heart of this is a highly worrisome race relations problem that is not only disruptive of desperately needed unity but also undermines our fundamentals, not least for standing in the way of constructive dialogue. Rather than engage in the issues, the government chooses to police thought and expression, the imminent sedition laws for cyberspace aptly illustrating the siege mentality of the current leadership.

To say that the citizenry is fearful for its future would not be overstating the situation, I think. For many of us, hope of the leadership recognising that what is best for our country is not necessarily defined by its political interests has diminished, if not wholly faded away. Trends that led us to doubt the quality and integrity of the government have not been arrested; concerns about the independence of key institutions—the Attorney-General's Chambers, police, anti-corruption commission, Judiciary, and Election Commission, to name but a few—still abound as do doubts about the commitment of these bodies to the spirit of the Constitution.

The rakyat (people) has for some time felt that it cannot take their government at face value or believe in it being committed to do right by them. The constant refrains by its agents that all is well have worn thin. It is for this reason that the vote turned against the BN in 2008 the way it did. Wisdom would dictate that this was not so much due to voters favoring the PR rather than rejecting the BN.

Forgive me if I am not saying anything new in this. There is a purpose in reiterating this for the benefit of the PR. In the aftermath of the previous general election, opposition politicians talked about the political tsunami that engulfed the nation in tones of euphoric surprise initially. Over time, the tone and tenor of the rhetoric mutated and it is beginning to seem as if some of the politicians feel they are where they entitled to be. Some have gone so far as to posture as if they are our only choice.

This sense of entitlement is worrying as it is possibly indicative of politics having trumped the underlying cause of change and reform. If this is the case, the line between these politicians and those whom they condemn is less defined than they would have us believe. It would be wise for these politicians to recall that they were swept to success by a voter sentiment that is as likely to change its direction if the voters are left dissatisfied with what they perceive.

Leave aside the fact that the PR has precious little to make voters aware of what it expects to when, and if, it gets to Putrajaya. Or that it has not made clear what and how it will do as the government will be more viable for the nation than what the BN is doing. These are important issues but are unfortunately beyond the scope of this commentary.

Consider instead what it is Malaysians are being shown about PR through Keadilan. The Keadilan party election controversy raises serious questions about the ability of the party, and its allies whose fate is tied to it, to champion democracy it says it is fighting for.

Electoral irregularities are bound to happen and in any race, there will always be concerns about how The PKR Troika for Change and Reform level the playing field is. What is troubling is the scale of the complaints and the manner in which they have, or rather have not, been addressed. We have heard much about naysayers, traitors and the like, but we have heard little about the complaints levelled against the process and how they have been dealt with.

Malaysians need to understand clearly what it is that happened and why it happened. In

particular, they need to be made to understand why there are factions within the party that have allowed their personal interests to get in the way of the cause they have represented themselves as championing.

Equally of concern is how, despite the matter having a direct bearing in the reputation of the reputation of the coalition as a whole, the other members of the PR feel unqualified to raise their concerns about it publicly. This is reminiscent of the relationship that the other component parties have with UMNO and, if so, raises an issue as to the power dynamics within the coalition.

The PR cannot run away from the fact that the Keadilan controversy has dented public confidence. Simply repeating that all is well will not go far in addressing the fundamental difficulties that have been brought into focus by it. Concrete steps must be taken.

Which brings me to the crux of the matter. I still hold the view that we need a new way of governing our country. The question is, are we comfortable with placing our hopes entirely on PR? Some would have us believe that it is one or the other, a model that is problematic now that PR has shown itself to have feet of clay. I do not think our options are that limited. For one, PR can be made to see that it does not play a messianic role in the unfolding saga. For another, who is to say that we should not be recasting the paradigm and looking at alternatives?

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