

Malaysia Politics and the Obsession with Power

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Power is integral to politics but the obsession with the perpetuation and pursuit of power in Malaysia in the last couple of years has gone beyond reasonable boundaries.

On one side you have a person who is hell-bent on remaining in power in spite of the massive ethical questions surrounding his direct and indirect involvement in a state-owned strategic investment company that was mired in money-laundering, fraudulence and manipulation on a gigantic scale through individuals and entities associated with it. Some of these individuals and entities are being investigated in other countries. A few of them have been convicted in court and imprisoned. And yet in Malaysia there has been no concrete action against the alleged culprits though the Public Accounts Committee of the Malaysian Parliament had proposed in April 2016 that one of the former senior officials of the investment company in question be investigated thoroughly and held answerable. The unwillingness to act against blatant wrongdoing has tarnished the reputation of the person at the apex of the nation. He is obviously not prepared to acknowledge that there is an albatross around his neck.

At the other end of the ring we have a person who is determined to oust the person at the apex of the nation. He is willing to forge marriages of convenience with his former foes in order to achieve this objective — even if it means repudiating his own words and deeds from yesteryear. In the process, he has revealed that it is the attainment of power regardless of the means employed that matters most to him.

The Machiavellian politics of the two principal protagonists has had an adverse impact upon Malaysian public life as a whole. The supporters of each protagonist present their adversary in the vilest terms conceivable. For those opposed to the person at the apex, he has done nothing good though in reality the thrust he has given to the coordinated delivery of public services through Urban Transformation Centres (UTCs), public housing, public transportation and the digital economy has benefitted segments of society. Likewise, opponents of the man trying to oust the person at the apex have deliberately ignored his considerable achievements when he was at the pinnacle for 22 years that would include transforming a commodity based economy to a middle-level manufacturing nation and have instead chosen to focus only on his shortcomings and failures. This skewed approach has also begun to influence perspectives on the economy and ethnic relations.

Some of the opponents of the person at the apex keep repeating that Malaysia is on the verge of bankruptcy — a wild allegation that runs contrary to current evidence such as our strong foreign reserves position. Similarly, opponents of his adversary never tire of highlighting alleged abuses of power in Penang and Selangor, states under PakatanHarapan, when the truth is ordinary people have benefitted from some of their welfare-oriented programmes. For PakatanHarapan, UMNO dominates the ruling

Barisan Nasional and its other component parties have no say at all in decision-making but this is not quite accurate as demonstrated by the role that a Sarawak BN party played in shaping the coalition's stand on RUU 355. By the same token, it is wrong of UMNO to argue that the DAP is the dominant force in the Pakatan which given historic, demographic and electoral realities make no sense at all.

If misrepresentations and distortions have become more pervasive in Malaysian politics as a result of the tussle for power of the two antagonists it is partly because the media have performed a negative role. Segments of the established media have been unrelenting in their often vicious attacks upon the opponent of the person at the apex. The decorum and courtesy due to an elder who all said and done had served the nation have been thrown to the winds. Sections of the new media blindly opposed to the person at the apex are equally guilty of coarse, crude criticisms of the man and his family which only reflect their own lack of etiquette.

A more responsible and balanced approach on the part of both the established and new media regardless of who they support or oppose would contribute towards a change in the atmosphere. A changed atmosphere is a prerequisite for the interrogation of power itself which must happen if the nation as a whole is to become less obsessed with power for its own sake. The two coalitions, BN and PK, and any other party that is entering the electoral fray, are even more crucial in bringing about a change in the attitude towards power. The electoral actors themselves, more than anyone else, should realise that an obsession with power could lead to their own destruction because it will only intensify internal friction and factionalism. To put it differently, politics should never be separated from principles, however difficult it may be in certain circumstances. This is where civil society has a vital role to play. If more and more civil society groups demand that politicians adhere to certain principles in politics and refuse to endorse them in an unquestioning manner especially when they violate the most fundamental norms of decency in public conduct, it is not inconceivable that they will be forced to change.

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