

I was recently asked to answer some questions for an Australian news programme:

1. Barisan Nasional has won several apparent victories over the Opposition in the last few weeks, but you have been critical of some of these. Could you explain why?

It depends what you mean by victory, and victory for whom. What happened in Perak recently has all the appearance of a desperate and ill-conceived grab for power, with constitutional consequences that are still being played out.

Barisan Nasional's loss of popular support is the real issue, so our task must be to regain support.

We really have lost support. March 8 was not a freak result. We have had two by-election losses, both of which were exacerbated by our own members abstaining, or voting for the Opposition, to have that message drummed into the party leadership.

Victory would be to regain that support, and to translate those gains constitutionally into a stronger presence in the government. It would mean coming to terms with the true causes for our loss of support, and addressing those causes with real reform. Yet our leadership has done nothing of the kind over the last year. Instead we celebrate "victories" achieved by tricks and shortcuts liable to lose us even more ground with the Malaysian electorate.

These moves harm the long-term prospects of Umno, and especially those of Barisan Nasional. However, they may serve candidates trying to secure their standing within the party in view of upcoming party elections. Weak leaders will pass off pyrrhic victories for the real thing, rally party members in the opposite direction from reform, and march them farther from the expectations and values of the Malaysian electorate.

No party can survive long with leaders who are so ready to sacrifice its viability for short-term and short-sighted political interests.

2. Some commentators speak of the need for BN and, particularly, UMNO reform, in particular a return to a more negotiated style of government. How far would you say UMNO has strayed from this consensus building mode of government, and how far is such reform necessary?

Consensual leadership is BN's value proposition, if you will. If we lose this, we might as well close shop.

The negotiated power-sharing model that BN practiced successfully in the past requires a genuine partnership among the leaders of the various parties. It takes far more strength and ability to negotiate a consensus than to carry decisions by numerical dominance alone. As the dominant partner of this coalition, Umno has a special responsibility of leadership in this process. It means we pick leaders with the ability and moral authority to mediate consensus and hold a moderate, pragmatic centre while maintaining an ethnic support base. This is something that cannot be done by weak or tainted leaders.

The consensus building mode of government requires leadership formed in a tradition in which the skills and relationships needed to govern in this manner are consciously handed on. But the party succession is now dominated by ethnic champions or party warlords with little else to qualify them to govern a plural society with a sophisticated, trade-oriented economy.

There is also a structural reason for the incipient breakdown of our consensual model. For the model to work, each of the major ethnic parties must credibly and reliably represent its ethnic base. This is no longer the case. MIC, MCA, and now possibly UMNO, have each lost the majority support of the ethnic communities they claim to represent. The very raison d'être of the model, and perhaps even of these parties, is at stake.

Nevertheless we still need this model of consensus-based government, helmed by a Malay

on Victory, Consensual Leadership and Reversion to Form

Written by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah

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leadership imbued with a sense of duty to Malaysia in all its plurality, East and West. The country still needs capable, centrist leaders who are also real leaders of the Malay and Muslim community, able to anchor and partner a multiracial and multi-religious consensus for a progressive country. At the outset this means a solid commitment to the rule of law which alone guarantees our form of government by constitutional monarchy and the rights and freedoms of all Malaysians. Umno is failing to provide this leadership but this does not mean we don't still need it, and need it desperately.

3. □ Last week, the three contenders for the post of UMNO Youth chief held a live debate. Do you think these representatives of the future leadership are likely to embrace any necessary change?

Their individual records on that score have not inspired hope. None of them has presented a consistent and principled orientation towards reform. Some views expressed in that debate actually called for reversion to bad old form rather than for reform. If the party continues on its present recourse, the question would be moot.