

Unity Government

Written by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah

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Dato' Seri Abdul Hadi Awang's call for a unity government should be taken seriously.

I appealed for discussions leading to a unity solution last September, when it was already clear that the country is at a dangerous impasse. I said it is time to come together.

The factors I mentioned were:

1. Our political conflicts threaten to deteriorate into constitutional crises.
2. We will be suffering the effects of a global economic crisis on a scale we have never faced.
3. Racial and religious issues, fanned by politics and media incitement, threaten to spiral out of control.
4. The very integrity of the Federation is at stake. The grievances of Sabah and Sarawak cannot be papered-over with political manoeuvres. They are about the fundamental basis of the Federation.
5. There is a real danger of our falling into a long-term loop of decline, with job losses, crime, social conflict, institutional breakdown and political instability feeding upon each other.

Our problems are fundamental, and must be faced immediately. But BN cannot do this alone.

Such problems have been accumulating for decades. They cannot be fixed with a mere change at the top because Umno, in its present undemocratic, patronage-driven form, is part of the problem. MCA and MIC and Gerakan are in tatters and the BN system has broken down. The negotiated power-sharing arrangement which held the Alliance and the Barisan Nasional together has stopped working, not merely from the failure of one or two individuals, but for

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structural reasons. But this arrangement is what gave BN its electoral success, underwrote our claim to represent the major communities of Malaysia, and ensured political stability. This breakdown is a serious matter. We have known no other system since Independence.

With the very basis of the BN in question, we cease being able to win elections and find ourselves taking increasingly desperate measures to stay in power.

As UMNO drifts farther from the Malaysian mainstream, the temptation to find support in racial and religious sentiment grows. There will be a tendency to maintain power by with the instruments of state. Such actions achieve victory without confidence, power without legitimacy. They undermine the legitimacy of the government and of key institutions such as the police and the judiciary. They undermine the rule of law. Lately even the sanctity of Parliament has been dishonoured. As a government loses legitimacy the only instruments left to it will be those of brute power.

The culmination of the “transition plan” next month will not magically set us on the path to restoration either. That device for avoiding the renewal of leadership has turned Umno’s elections process into a twice extended year-long public spectacle in the procurement of positions, with more than a thousand reports of corruption and abuse now buried without further ado. The winners of the coming party elections in March may find themselves lacking legitimacy in the eyes of public if they think they have thereby won the right to become government leaders.

The results of the last elections speaks of the rakyat’s desire for change, but for peaceful change led by a government that has the confidence of the people. They ask for a halt to the thievery and social rot of corruption, they seek unity and peace, a brighter future for their children and tangible improvements in their lives.

The BN is unable to address such needs amidst the historic challenges of this time, but neither is the Opposition which, although it has some capable people, is a raw, tenuous association of ideologically opposed parties often bound by little more than their opposition to BN.

BN has the numbers in Parliament to hold onto the federal government without reaching out to the Opposition, but without some kind of a unity government solution, at least in the interim, the

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Malaysian rakyat will not have a government that can do more than hang on grimly to a deteriorating status quo. The foundations of our stability, and of our previous success, are eroding fast, and will soon be gone. After we have drifted past a certain point — and we have drifted for awhile now — we may wake up to find ourselves in freefall.

With an epic economic crisis, failing institutions, pervasive and institutionalised corruption, increasing crime, the deteriorating employability of our graduates, growing joblessness and the erosion of the rule of law, with increasing hardship among our people, we need to do more than coast down to a failure that we can already foresee. We need to come together to chart a better path. That must begin with a leap beyond our bankrupt politics, made by party leaders and elected representatives of the people who rise to statesmanship.

This, roughly, is the case for a government of unity.