

Malaysia: A Clear Direction for the Present

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*Malaysians at this moment are concerned about two different types of numbers. The overwhelming majority are worried about the recent spike in Covid 19 infections and the increase in the number of related deaths. There is a much smaller segment of the population that is focussed upon the number of members of Parliament that the leader of the Opposition **Anwar Ibrahim** can mobilise in his bid to oust current **Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin** and seize the post for himself.*

If Covid deaths in Malaysia are small compared to many other countries, the impact of the coronavirus upon lives and livelihoods has been devastating. It has increased the destitution of the poor and vulnerable in our midst. In contrast, Anwar's pursuit of numbers is linked to one man's obsessive ambition to become Prime Minister. It is an obsession that has expressed itself on other occasions in the last 22 years. In 1998 he sought to undermine then UMNO president and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad through certain unscrupulous party functionaries when the nation was facing a massive financial and economic crisis. In 2008, he attempted to topple the elected government of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi through an unsuccessful bid to engineer cross-overs in parliament though Abdullah's Barisan coalition was just 8 seats short of a two-thirds majority. Today, he is trying again encouraged by the fact that Muhyiddin has only a razor thin majority in Parliament. However, he forgets that Muhyiddin is widely perceived as a leader who has managed Malaysia's twin health and economic crises with a sincere heart and a steady hand.

For Anwar and his supporters, Muhyuddin still lacks legitimacy because he had set aside his partners in the Pakatan Harapan government and instead teamed up with their foe, namely UMNO. While all these manoeuvres were not illegal, they continue to raise ethical issues. But how can these ethical issues be resolved if Anwar is now willing to collude with tarnished characters in UMNO in order to get rid of Muhyiddin and become Prime Minister? It is not through morally questionable moves that one will be able to restore integrity to the political process.

Perhaps it is only through a general election that one can re-set the moral barometer. But after what has happened in Sabah, one has every reason to be apprehensive about a general election and how it could lead to an explosion of Covid cases. If it is judicious to avoid a general election, then what other avenues are available to ensure that there is a degree of stability in the political system?

One, the Conference of Rulers an entity which commands constitutional authority should at a time like this play a much more active role. As a collective institution it should not only advise and guide the legislature and the Cabinet but also ensure that political actors do not deviate from their entrusted responsibilities. In fact the King and individual Sultans have on

a few occasions asked political leaders to concentrate upon the Covid and economic crises and not get embroiled in the constant pursuit of political power.

Two, in concrete terms, the Conference of Rulers could persuade the government and the opposition at both federal and state levels to establish a mechanism that would enable them to cooperate closely in finding solutions to the Covid and economic challenges. Genuine, sincere cooperation between the two could even result in more effective measures especially in the economy which would bring significant benefits to the people.

Three, such cooperation should lead to a situation where the leader of the government, the Prime Minister, and the leader of the Opposition are concerned solely with fulfilling their duties, undertaking their amanah, rather than undermining each other. The well-being of the people — not their own self-serving interests — would be their overriding passion.

Four, their commitment to the people would translate into policies and laws in the next few months which seek to curb certain unsavoury practices which have been detrimental to the national interest. For instance a law to curb ‘party hopping’ which some legislators are working on should be expedited. Similarly, the proposal to create an ‘Ombudsman, first mooted in the early seventies, which will endow the office with autonomous powers to investigate and act against wrongdoings that have not received due attention from the government department or agency concerned, should be prioritised without delay.

Five, the Dewan Rakyat and the Dewan Negara should also as soon as possible adopt resolutions that will re-affirm the clarion call of the Conference of Rulers to adhere to the 5 Aspirations and the 5 Principles of the Rukunegara as the “moral compass” of the nation made on the 10th of October 2017. Given the prevailing atmosphere, the Aspirations and Principles serve as laudable guidelines.

If the five proposals made here and other similar ideas are implemented within the next 6 to 9 months, it is quite conceivable that the nation will be able to concentrate upon tackling the Covid challenge and the current economic woes. We would also be able to devote our time, energy and efforts towards implementing the 2021 Budget and adopting the 12th Malaysia Plan early next year. The nation will not be distracted by unproductive politics.

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