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DONE MAKING DO

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OOI KEE BENG

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Writing this section for a book is quite enjoyable work because it gives me pause and makes me remember how I cannot possibly accomplish much without the goodwill of others around me.

This is my fifth collection of articles, and looking back at them now, I cannot help but feel that Malaysia as a whole has come a long way in quite a short time, and it has been an exciting time for all over the last 10 years.

I would here like to thank all those who have been an inspiration, and who shared insights with me on Malaysia politics and other matters.

It is a sign of maturity in Malaysia's nation-building process that more and more aspects have to be studied in order for us to understand the complicated dynamics that are now evident in the country.

However, what I would like to acknowledge most clearly here is not what I owe others in writing these articles, but the subject itself—Malaysia and Malaysians, and how they have been inspiring in their activism, and their hope for a better future for their children and their country.

It has become clear to more and more of them that the ethnocentric arrogance, the race-based policies and the communal politics that have defined them for so long cripple their potential, and are demeaning. They deserve better, and the new empowerment they now feel is in turn an inspiration to others as well.

INTRODUCTION

How long does a transition take before we should be calling it something else, like New Normal, for example? In Malaysia, the word “transition” has been used since Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed decided to retire as Prime Minister. The main reasons for that came out of the many successes and excesses, of the period between 1981 and 2003. The latter can be read in the choice of reforms that his successor Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi tried to carry out. The ballooning budget deficit was such an area; the sorry state of the police force was another. And coining “Islam Hadhari” was his attempt to moderate religious fervor and opportunism.

Corruption and money politics were other major concerns back in the early days of post-Mahathir Malaysia.

Ten years have now passed, and Abdullah Badawi’s slow reforms proved far from steady. In failing to carry out his promises, he failed to please neither his party nor his people. After voters in the general elections of March 8, 2008 turned against the central government on a scale never before seen in Malaysian politics, his own party leadership decided that they had had enough of his dilly-dally style of governance.

Mahathir Mohamed made it his mission to dethrone Abdullah, and his followers within UMNO succeeded in doing that on 3 April 2009, and the Najib Razak administration took over. Post-Mahathir Malaysia was not as post-Mahathir as we had thought.

Criminality remains a major issue; the police force is still not trusted by the public; the national debt is still growing; corruption continues as never before; the income gap is increasing; and money-for-vote politics is now routine and mainstream. Mahathir’s influence is still strongly discernible in increasingly dark corners of Malaysian politics; and religious intolerance continues to grow.

Najib Razak was in fact ignored in 2003 by Mahathir for the position of prime minister. But as Abdullah failed in Mahathir's eyes in 2003-2009, the runner-up now became the preferred option.

Needless to say, Malaysia remains in reform mode today. Prime Minister Najib Razak has during his four years in power been putting a series of reforms in place. For that, he should be commended. The efficacy of his policies is still debated, however, and he suffers a long-standing credibility problem due to his inability to control the extreme elements in his party; and to the scandals that have shadowed him.

His postponement of general elections until the very end of the mandate period strengthened the public view that he tends to be indecisive when he can least afford it; that he actually felt that the opposition might win, and that even if he won, it would not be by a large margin which could mean that his own party would lose patience and turn against him, as it had done with Abdullah Badawi. UMNO infighting is after all historically common and is par for the course.

What is the New Normal in Malaysia then, for there is surely no going back to the old days when slogans about racial unity and rights, and threats of street violence were sufficient to silence oppositional voices? Even draconian laws can no longer be resorted to as easily as before.

The New Normal seems then to be an arena where the Barisan Nasional continues to talk about "reforms" while the oppositional Pakatan Rakyat coalition calls for "change". Whichever way the elections of 2013 go, the country-wide effort to formulate and construct a new Malaysia will go on for the foreseeable future.

While we discuss how the power balance between BN and PR will develop, it is vital to remember that the social forces and consciousness that accompanied the end of the Mahathir era are here to stay, and they are can be highly influential.

Unwittingly, by sacking and jailing Anwar Ibrahim in 1998-1999, Mahathir turned him into a lightning rod for popular dissent. Had Abdullah been serious and successful with his reforms, the opposition

parties would not have come so far as they have done. We must remember that he was a very popular leader in 2003-2005, and he was that because of what he signified—serious change from within.

Najib tried to put on that discarded mantle, but it is still “serious change from within” that is missing. Despite his many reforms, public trust in his coalition has not increased accordingly. It is telling that surveys always show him to be much more popular than the coalition he represents.

The new actor in the equation, and the one that will decide the New Normal, is thus the Malaysian People. This may sound glib, but given that the losses suffered by the BN in 2008 were due to Malaysians voting *against* the federal government more than *for* the opposition, we have to admit that political consciousness in Malaysia has increased beyond the point of no return.

Public demands for good governance, for public safety, for reliable public utilities, for good schools, for leaders they can be proud of, for broad acknowledgement of the country’s multicultural essence, have risen tremendously. These are fueled by the increasingly urbanized nature of Malaysians, most notably the Malays; higher educational levels; the youthfulness of the population; the easy access to information; and the empowerment that the new media bring.

This dynamic has over the last 15 years brought into being an opposition that is giving the federal government a run for its money.

What we will see in the coming years will be the continued rise of a national consciousness in a people that is much less willing to “make do”. “Making do” was the mentality nurtured by decades of divisive racial politics and threats of violence. I believe Malaysians are done making do.