The Debate: Khairy

Despite Differences, Malaysians Can Still Come Together
By Khairy Jamaluddin

My country has just gone through the most competitive and keenly fought general election in the nation’s history. In 2008, when the ruling coalition that I represent, Barisan Nasional (BN), lost its two-thirds parliamentary supermajority for the first time ever, some observers welcomed the dawn of a two-party system in Malaysia. The results of the recent general election on May 5 have confirmed this. A two-party, or two-coalition, political system is here to stay in Malaysia.

The purpose of this essay is not to explain the results of the general election. Much has been said and written about the reasons why Malaysians voted the way they did. Rather, I want to focus on where Malaysia goes from here and whether political reconciliation is possible.

Many countries that go through fractious and bitter electoral contests have to deal with an aftermath that is equally divisive. Without a sincere and concerted attempt at reconciliation, countries can be paralyzed by partisan politics, petty posturing and unending recriminations.

The current situation

For Malaysians, the need to come together and move on is paramount. We have been in “election mode” for at least two years prior to this general election, during which the mere anticipation of the polls split families and friends down party lines. Although this did not hamper the effective running of government, much of the public policy debate and contestation of political ideas were conducted across strictly partisan divisions played out in a zero-sum game.

Any hope that the general election would draw a line under a period of intense political divisiveness and offer some closure for the Malaysian electorate, at least until the next polls, appears increasingly misplaced.

While Prime Minister Najib Razak was quick to reach across the divide on election night by calling for national reconciliation, the actions of the opposition have indicated in no uncertain terms that they are not interested in bringing the country together and putting a politically turbulent last few years behind us.

The opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, must be held responsible for the impasse that Malaysia finds itself in today. A few days before polling, Anwar began a systematic and cynical attack to undermine the election results by alleging that tens of thousands of foreign nationals were being flown in to cast votes illegally for BN. His allegation remains unsubstantiated to this day, and there were no cases recorded of foreign nationals casting a ballot during the election despite the presence of election monitors from all competing parties at every single voting station across the country.

Just hours after polls closed, even before the first constituency result was announced, Anwar pre-empted the likely defeat of Pakatan Rakyat (PR), the opposition coalition which Anwar leads, by writing on his Twitter account: “PR has won. We urge UMNO [the United Malays National Organisation, the biggest party in BN] and the EC [Election Commission] to (sic) not to attempt to hijack the results.” What followed, of course, was a refusal by Anwar to concede and to accept the election results. Instead, he continues to make unsubstantiated allegations against BN of electoral fraud and irregularities.

This is not to say that BN does not take the allegations seriously. The last thing we want is to win an election that is tainted. It is important that the mandate we receive is credible and legitimate. This is why we have urged the opposition to submit to due process and file election petitions with the judiciary instead of making baseless accusations against BN and the EC. It is instructive to remember that this is the same judiciary that Anwar had repeatedly turned to and trusted over the last few years in filing defamation suits against his political opponents. It is also the same judiciary that quashed a recent charge against him for sexual impropriety. He has spoken about the judiciary’s independence in reference to these cases. There is therefore no reason for him not to trust the judiciary’s impartiality in hearing his coalition’s election petitions.

While continuing to cast aspersions on the election results, Anwar has at the same time allowed for his coalition colleagues to be sworn in as heads of state governments that they won. Where his coalition prevailed, the results are good. Where they lost, the results are tainted. He continues to make unsubstantiated allegations against BN of electoral fraud and irregularities. The majority of Malaysians — including those who voted for the opposition — want BN to start governing and delivering on their transformation agenda, and they want the government honest and regroup for the next election. What is certain is that we need to end this standoff. The majority of Malaysians — including those who voted for the opposition — want to move beyond the elections. They want to move on in as heads of state governments that they won. Where his coalition prevailed, the results are good. Where they lost, the results are tainted. One sure way to have it both ways.

Anwar’s refusal to move on is all the more surprising given the gentlemen’s agreement between him and Najib that was brokered by former Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla before the elections. Both men agreed to accept the will of the Malaysian people and the finality of the results. It was perhaps in this context that
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Is Political Reconciliation Possible in Malaysia?

Anwar announced his intention to retire from politics if he failed to become prime minister this time around.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Where does Malaysia go from here? What is certain is that we need to end this standoff. The majority of Malaysians — including those who voted for the opposition — want to move beyond the elections. They want BN to start governing and delivering on our transformation agenda, and they want the opposition to keep the government honest and regroup for the next election. This was most evident when the opposition was unencumbered by political self-interest.

Moving on will have to begin with accepting the election results. Once the election petitions are heard in court, both sides must accept the rulings of the judiciary.

Next, we need to work together to strengthen and further improve our electoral system. It was with this in mind that Prime Minister Najib announced recently that the EC would be placed under the oversight of a bipartisan parliamentary committee. It is our hope that the opposition will work with us to address any weaknesses in the electoral process.

We will also strengthen parliament in order to facilitate a civil and inclusive political atmosphere with the creation of more select committees to scrutinize legislation. Hopefully, more informed parliamentary debates will result in a political culture that is more oriented toward issues and policy rather than one that is dominated by political grandstanding, populist rhetoric and personal attacks.

Finally, both sides will have to agree to put aside what is politically expedient to address some fundamental problems facing our country. Two critical and related areas that need bipartisan deliberation and consensus would be race relations and social justice. Too often relations between Malaysia’s ethnic groups and the legitimate expectations of these communities have fallen victim to political one-upmanship. Both sides should commit to a bipartisan commission or consultative process that will bind us to far-reaching reforms, unencumbered by political self-interest.

This can be the start of Malaysia’s political reconciliation. Prime Minister Najib has not retracted his outstretched hand, a gesture that he made as soon as he received his mandate to govern. I hope, for the sake of our country, that our friends in the opposition will not leave him hanging.

Khairy Jamaluddin is Malaysia’s Minister of Youth and Sports.

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