Reconciliation Is Impossible Without Meaningful Reforms

By Rafizi Ramli

THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNING cannot be separated from the question of legitimacy. A government elected by the minority and conjured into office through myriad election irregularities will continue to struggle to establish its legitimacy. Thus it is that Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak’s administration, stuck in such a political labyrinth, began to preach political reconciliation against a backdrop of unprecedented public protests that have now entered a second month. What exactly is the political reconciliation that Najib seeks?

Najib, and to a large extent his United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party, is staring at a bleak electoral future, confirmed by the results of the May 5 general election that saw his Barisan National coalition lose the popular vote for the first time since 1969.

Topmost among all the problems he has to navigate is the continuous challenge posed by Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition. Anwar is charismatic, dynamic, resilient and unwavering — the complete opposite of the way Najib is largely regarded by the public (especially among younger voters). Najib has consistently avoided a public debate with Anwar, which further weakens his leadership in the eyes of his own party and the public.

A scenario where Najib has to face another parliamentary term under the onslaught of Anwar will prove politically fatal for the prime minister. His image as a weak leader incapable of matching Anwar’s charisma will grow worse; that, in turn, will invite a leadership challenge from within UMNO. This can only mean that a weaker and split UMNO will face the opposition coalition in the next general election, which is likely to be the most decisive of all.

It is therefore only logical that Najib must find a way to mute Anwar’s challenge. Unwilling to face or defeat Anwar head-to-head, Najib now resorts to attempting a political alliance through his now often-quoted “political reconciliation” scheme.

But Najib is missing the most important lesson from the electoral setback that his coalition suffered. The desire for change has brought together Malaysians of various groups and creeds to form a grand coalition opposed to the status quo. If the political reconciliation mooted by Najib is his way to preserve the status quo and his party’s rule without implementing meaningful reforms, it is futile and doomed to fail from the beginning.

I maintain that reconciliation can only take place with the willingness of every party to forge an alliance based on a set of agreed reforms, because that is the clear message sent by the voters during and after election day.

WHAT NAJIB MUST DO

First and foremost, Najib must be willing to dismantle the authoritarian media regime operated by his party that monopolizes the mainstream press. The level of propaganda and character assassination directed against the opposition coalition and its leaders has reached such epidemic levels that a large majority of the urban population shuns the mainstream media altogether. The independence and quality of the mainstream media in Malaysia is among the worst in the region in spite of the relative wealth that it enjoys.

Najib shamelessly exploited the grip that this authoritarian media regime has over rural voters to instill fears of ethnic clashes and minority dominance. His whole campaign was designed around pitting one race against another and was made possible by the absolute control he has over the mainstream media.

Dismantling a status quo that allows such obscene propaganda to be aired every day means relinquishing his party’s stranglehold over the mainstream media. In fact, my party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat, has made it clear that we will push for legislation that limits a political party’s ownership of a public media entity. If reconciliation means reforms that upset the status quo, will Najib agree to free the Malaysian media from his and his party’s grip?

The last general election also saw an unprecedented number of reports and testimonies from across the country of widespread electoral fraud and irregularities. This includes the existence of phantom voters (either in the form of non-Malaysians allowed to vote or Malaysians who were allowed to vote more than once in different constituencies); massive vote-buying by candidates from Najib’s coalition; the failure of the Election Commission to administer indelible ink to stop multiple voting; manipulation of the advance and postal voting process that discriminated against opposition candidates; and a plethora of other complaints.

The disgust over what the majority of Malaysians consider as the worst electoral fraud in our history manifested itself in a series of spontaneous rallies across the country that have so
GLOBAL ASIA  The Debate  Is Political Reconciliation Possible in Malaysia?

There is no political force in the country — for not supporting his coalition (conveniently ignoring the reality that he also lost in urban areas of mixed ethnicity).

Therefore, if these three items on the reform agenda — media reform, electoral reform and an end to racial politics — are not prerequisites for the reconciliation that Najib seeks, it will fail from the very beginning.

Najib is well aware that the three-reform agenda will spell the end of his party and his coalition because their prolonged political life depends on the status quo. Pushing for such reforms means accelerating internal revolts against him. On the other hand, Anwar Ibrahim, who has dedicated his life toward reforming the system, will not agree to any form of reconciliation without such reforms in place.

In the end, the political reconciliation that Najib seeks will remain unfulfilled. It is constrained by the elements in his party and coalition that see real reforms as an immediate threat to their political survival.

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