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Malaysian Lessons for Singapore?

Hoo Tiang Boon, Kumar Ramakrishna and Norman Vasu

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The Malaysian political scene has seen great change with the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition suffering astonishing electoral losses. This commentary suggests that the Malaysian experience may well hold potentially useful lessons for Singapore's leaders and decision makers.

At the recently concluded 12th Malaysian General Elections, the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government suffered an astonishing electoral setback. Not only did BN lose its two-thirds majority in Parliament, it also, significantly, ceded power in the states of Kedah, Perak, Selangor and Penang. Moreover, the BN also failed to wrest control over the “outlier” state of Kelantan. Indeed, the alteration of the Malaysian political landscape has been so dramatic that observers have called it a “political tsunami”.

In light of the extraordinary developments in Malaysia, there has been no lack of discussion and analysis on both the political repercussions as well as the future trajectory of Kuala Lumpur's political landscape. That said, little attention has been paid to the *potential lessons* other regional leaders or incumbent governments could possibly distil from the Malaysian experience. While it may be a truism that lessons extracted from the experiences of other polities should never be understood outside of their unique political, historical, socio-economic and cultural context, broader governance or strategic lessons of relevance to Singapore may still be gleaned. In particular, from the Singaporean perspective, are there any instructive learning points that could be drawn from BN's stunning reversal of fortune?

The Anesthetization of the Ruling Malaysian Regime

For a start, it appears that the Malaysian political leadership has become severely disconnected and desensitized to sentiments and realities on the Malaysian ground. Whatever factors may be attributed to BN's poor electoral showing—*inter alia*, the rising cost of living; the poor management of ethnic-religious issues (including the anxieties of many Indians and Chinese that their personal, cultural and religious space is being inexorably shrunken by Islamization); perceptions of deep-rooted corruption and cronyism; unresponsive and sluggish governmental machinery—the truth of the matter is that the BN leadership has been *slow to recognise that these very reasons resonated powerfully* with many

Malaysians. Stated differently, there have been flawed or little attempts by the ruling BN regime to gauge and grasp the true level of the “social temperature” on the ground. And by “social temperature”, we refer to the prevailing public moods, attitudes, opinions and sentiments relating to key societal concerns and issues. Owing to this misreading and lack of appreciation of the extant “social temperature”, the BN was precariously out of touch with ground realities and was unable to responsively address key concerns or grievances of most Malaysians.

But what can account for this misjudgement of the prevailing “social temperature”? One possible explanation could be sheer governmental complacency. Perhaps as a result of BN’s longstanding dominance of the Malaysian political scene or its sterling showing during the last polls where it captured an unprecedented 91% of seats in the parliament, the BN may have started to take for granted its lofty status quo. After all, every election since 1969 has seen the dominant BN coalition returned to government as the overwhelming victor—a situation that may have made the BN believe that its political fundamentals must have been (and always will be) correct. However, four years—the length of time since the last election—is a long time in politics and ground realities can—and apparently have—rapidly shifted and transformed. Thus, when a ruling administration pays scant regard to the prevailing concerns of its citizenry and when it adopts a hubristic and unresponsive attitude to its citizenry, it may well pay the price—as BN found out to its cost.

Lessons for Singapore?

What then are the lessons for political leaders in Singapore based on the Malaysian example? Keeping in mind the caveat mentioned above about adopting lessons from abroad, this does not mean there are absolutely no practical takeaways that are possibly instructive for the Singaporean perspective. As highlighted by the Malaysian case study, the two potentially useful learning points are: (1) the need for governments to maintain a finger on the pulse of and an instinctive “feel” for the ground; and, (2) the need to avoid political and institutional complacency.

The first point relates to the importance of designing and creating an effective institutional mechanism to act as a “social thermometer” to keep track of the prevailing “social temperature”. While not suggesting that leaders should be preoccupied with every whim and bellyache of the electorate, it is not at all bad governance—and indeed, it is prudent governance—to pay close attention to the *bona fide* and legitimate concerns and sentiments on the ground. For Singapore, there exist mechanisms such as People’s Association, REACH, the *Straits Times* Forum page, Meet-the-People Sessions by Members of Parliament, and other arrangements. The question is: is there a centralized body that is capable of integrating the input from all these various institutional “collection points” into a *single, integrated snapshot of the aggregate social temperature in Singapore* at any time? It may not be a bad idea to start thinking about a more coordinated and systematic approach towards picking up and understanding “faint signals” and other “early warning indications” from the ground.

The second lesson is intimately linked to the first. Incumbent governments, even those with a record of strong electoral success and international acclaim, should not be lulled into a sense of complacency. The 19th century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz once warned senior political and military leaders that war is characterized by chance and unpredictability, primal passions, and the constant struggle to employ creativity—he called it the “genius” of the leaders—to impose reason upon and establish order out of the evolving political, strategic and operational tumult. He also added that although war may have its own grammar, its logic is inevitably political. His insights into the nature of war could also apply to the nature of politics and governance. The recent Malaysian general election results is a powerful reminder that like war, politics and governance is a beast that should not be left unbridled. Otherwise, the beast may bolt and the repercussions could well be very serious. Hence, while institutional arrangements to better systematically track public sentiments—for example, over the rising costs of living and the Mas Selamat escape— would be a step in the correct direction to close any “affective gaps” that may have opened between the state and society—this measure alone

may not be enough. It may be argued that this must be accompanied by what Clausewitz called *coup d'oeil*—or political intuition in our context—in senior and middle levels of the administration. Senior administrative officers, exercising *coup d'oeil*, would proactively anticipate possible adverse public reactions to policies and legislation while also designing effective strategies for educating the average citizen as to why things have to be done in a certain manner for the collective good. Put differently, senior administrative officials must not only anticipate public reaction but they must also better communicate with the people.

All in all, it is these two lessons that may be what is most instructive of the BN experience in the last Malaysian elections. Complacency and hubris arising from the laurels of past success coupled with the assumption that the social contract between state and society remains airtight, no matter what, would be two lessons that should not be learnt too late.

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