

First change of ruling party since independence

# Malaysia's new government must ensure that positive changes last

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**The 28-member civil society coalition Gabungan Bertindak Malaysia (GBM) congratulates Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the Pakatan Harapan coalition for the swift changes it has brought about in the first ten days in office. [Pakatan Harapan defeated the Barisan Nasional coalition, which has been in power since independence from Britain in 1957 -eds.]**

However, human history testifies that the early euphoria of regime change has often been overtaken by business as usual.

We urge the Harapan government to honour the following three critical success factors to guarantee that the positive changes are progressive, permanent and long lasting.

## **Actualising the vision in the Pakatan Harapan manifest**

The Harapan manifesto Buku Harapan is the vision and election promise to earn the voters' confidence and secure the rakyat's mandate. With 60 promises and five sets of special commitments, the manifesto outlines an ambitious blue print to rebuild Malaysia.

By fulfilling its manifesto promises, the new government is blessed with legitimacy, credibility and predictability. Except in the event of legitimate and highly compelling circumstances, the promises must not be broken.

We therefore welcome PM Mahathir's latest announcement that he would give up the education portfolio to keep Promise 12 of the manifesto, "the prime minister will not simultaneously hold other ministerial posts, especially the post of finance minister."

Prompt and timely actions, from Harapan's committees for institutional reforms on 1MDB [investment scandal involving former PM Najib Razak - ed.] and other scandals to the reduction of GST rate to zero percent by 1<sup>st</sup> of June, have enhanced Harapan's legitimacy, credibility, predictability and stability in this post-transition period.

## **Sustaining a loyal and healthy opposition**

A good government requires an effective opposition to keep it in check. Malaysia needs the government and the opposition to create a political governance that is competitive yet collaborative in order to move the country forward.

We welcome Mahathir's positive response on May 16 to public criticism against defections, and that Harapan will not accept turncoats from the Barisan Nasional [BN - in power from independence until

this election- ed.]

However, the opposition can only remain loyal and healthy when their roles are highly valued and respected in the political system. Harapan must engage proactively with BN, the Malaysia Islamic Party [PAS -opposition, Islamist - ed.] and other political parties that are not represented in the Parliament.

Opposition-run states – Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and Sarawak – must not be penalised in terms of funding allocations.

Towards this end, Harapan should expedite the implementation of the following promises, and operationalise them in the state assemblies where relevant.

*Promise 16 (Restore the dignity of the Parliament)*

- The parliamentary opposition leader to be granted minister status.
- Constituency funding to all parliamentarians to be based on a transparent formula.
- Select committees to be established to monitor every ministry.
- Public Accounts Committee to be headed by an opposition MP.
- Specific time to be allocated for the opposition's party agenda in both Dewan Rakyat [lower house] and Dewan Negara [upper house].

*Promise 18 (Create a political financing mechanism that has integrity)*

- Qualified political parties to receive annual funding from the government based on a transparent and consistent formula.

*Promise 24 (Revive the true spirit of federalism)*

- At least 10 percent of income tax generated in a state to be returned to that state.

Within the first three years, 50 percent on development expenditure to be ring-fenced for the five poorest states, Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis.

**Holding national dialogues with opposition, civil society**

To actualise the hopeful and inclusive new nation envisioned by its manifesto, Harapan must conduct a wide national conversation, with opposition and civil society as partners in deliberating the priorities of nation-rebuilding.

Mahathir should convene an all-party meeting with the top leaders of Harapan, BN, PAS, PSM, PBS and other opposition parties to forge a national consensus on how to ensure multiparty competition function optimally for the nation.

Based on the model of the committee on institutional reforms and the panel to investigate scandals, more civil society leaders should be appointed to the advisory panels to help implement reforms in various policy domains.

At the local level, townhall meetings can be held to involve political parties and civil society groups to deliberate on policy matters such as public transportation, policing and environmental protection.

Harapan must also keep her promises to facilitate public consultation in decision making, as brilliantly spelled out in the manifesto:

### *Promise 16 (Restore the dignity of the Parliament)*

- Civil society representatives be involved in parliamentary caucuses
- Green papers be produced to stimulate policy discussions
- White papers to be produced before new legislations

One pressing issue which demands immediate attention is national unity. On Feb 7, GBM proposed eight recommendations including the enactment of a National Harmony Act and ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) to be adopted by all political parties in their manifestos.

We look forward to a green paper at the earliest possible occasion to kick start a public consultation on this urgent and important matter.

GBM wishes the best to the Harapan government in its maiden endeavour to rebuild a Malaysia Sejahtera, a 'Better Malaysia' founded on the universal values of justice, equality, muhibbah, mutual benefit and the brotherhood of all Malaysians.

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### **P.S.**

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