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Time to close chapter on money politics

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AS we welcome the New Year, let us pause awhile to reflect on the past year. One of the significant events of 1996 was the Umno General Assembly and in particular the party elections to its supreme council. The event is significant as whatever happens in Umno is the concern of all Malaysians because Umno has been the dominant political force in the country before and after Merdeka and will continue to be so for years to come.

The 1996 party elections was in marked contrast to that of 1993. In the earlier election, large sums of money were spent by the candidates during the campaigning for party posts preceding the general assembly. The result was that several candidates were elected not because of their service to the party and the country but because they had money to spend.

The Umno president, Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, came out strongly against money politics and warned delegates that this was an unhealthy trend which could spell doom for the party and the country. So, for the 1996 party elections, strict disciplinary rules were enforced. Roadshows were banned. Even indirect campaigning was prohibited. Candidates holding public office were told not to abuse their official positions to gain political mileage. A few were even disqualified from standing.

Political leaders were to be chosen for their good track record of service to the party and the country and the potential for doing more. There was really no need for the politicians to go on a campaign trail for party posts. Practically every day in the mass media, there is publicity on the performance of politicians. But for money politics, the delegates to the general assembly are quite capable of exercising their own judgment when making their choice of party leaders.

In the old days, money politics was unheard of. The late Tun Sardon Zubir, when he was a minister, always insisted that the Press should not cover him when attending dinners but instead only when he was performing official functions like standing under the blazing sun and inspecting the progress of a road under construction or in the pouring rain and checking the safety of railway coaches.

Fortunately for all of us, the 1993 elections proved to be only an aberration. The 1996 election results showed that the delegates had taken heed of the president's warning. Candidates who were businessmen and had stood to advance their commercial interests failed to get elected. The apparent popularity of some politicians in 1993 hit rock bottom in 1996. The Umno leadership has been restored to normalcy, more or less.

What then of the future? After more than 50 years of its existence, the general membership of Umno is now more knowledgeable and better informed, indeed even constructively critical of party and government policies. At the party elections in 1999, the delegates will be choosing leaders who will be taking the country into the 21st century. The question arises: what type of politicians should we have?

It is becoming increasingly obvious that politics and business is not a good mix. We have seen how some people enter politics and then become millionaires even although they started with practically empty pockets. There have also been successful businessmen who entered politics only to become richer. This image of our politicians has to go. This is not to say that Malaysia Inc. is wrong. It is not. The concept is right but the perception is somewhat confused.

The time has probably arrived when we should seriously consider politics

as a career in itself. The country needs talented people who are really dedicated towards serving country and people. They should not enter politics as a stepping stone to untold riches.

Some countries have overcome this problem by paying their politicians well enough to devote their time, energy and expertise as full-time career politicians. Indeed, apart from Cabinet Ministers and State Exco members, even ordinary MPs and State Assemblymen find that if they were to discharge the public duties expected of them, they do not have time for business or other activities. With full-time, well-paid legislators, Parliament and State Assemblies can sit more often. Politicians can, of course, resign any time to enter into business or the professions and make money but not when they are politicians holding public office.

Perhaps the 1999 Umno elections should impose a prequalification that only MPs and State Assemblymen can stand as supreme council candidates. We will then know who are our real politicians and their track record. We would have created politics as a profession and closed the chapter on money politics.

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