

23/06/1998

Wisdom for the youth

DATUK Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the Umno Youth chief, caused more than a bit of a stir when he spoke of 'nepotisma and kronisma' at the Youth assembly last Thursday, forcing the ensuing three-day Umno general assembly to debate issues associated with these alien terms openly. The party found itself on the defensive because, as a member of the Umno supreme council, there were questions as to whether Zahid had raised the issues at its meetings chaired by the party president. And because he leads the young generation of Umno, his remarks caused speculation about a widening gap between the leadership and members at the grassroots level.

It led to several significant things happening during the assembly. It prompted the Government to issue several lists of names of so-called "Government cronies" who had been awarded shares or privatization projects. They included the Prime Minister's son, the Deputy Prime Minister's father and brother, Cabinet ministers and members of parliament, aside from hundreds of other names of "ordinary" Malays and Bumiputeras. Even Zahid's name was in one of the lists, although he went on record later to clarify that he did not own a share in the company that he was supposed to be associated with. The Umno Youth's initiative to debate the issues, despite Zahid's optimism, also led to talks within and outside the assembly that a section within the party was preparing to launch an all-out offensive against the leadership. With party elections just a year away, had the campaigning started already?

Zahid's main contribution to the 52nd Umno general assembly, for better or for worse, was to help make it more eventful. Especially for outsiders, as the issues provided various parties with new material to run down the party and the Malaysian Government. The attack on the leadership - for that was how Zahid's speech on Thursday had been interpreted - wasn't coming from foreigners or Westerners, nor was it coming from the Opposition. It came, finally, from within the party. It provided a rare spectacle for the outside world, of a group of Malay leaders struggling to come to terms with one another over terminologies that have been made relevant to the Malays only because of the powerful persuasion of the foreign media.

It made it necessary for the Umno president, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, to remind delegates and party members of the basic discipline, and courtesy, of using the appropriate channels to air grievances. Of the need to get a full grasp of the cause and effect of the economic and financial turmoil facing the country instead of subscribing to the reasonings of the West. To ignore or forget the fact that there are proper channels to address issues within the party could cause dangerous friction, negative speculation and a comical spectacle for others to laugh at. The best of intentions could backfire and result in the worst of implications if party members and leaders lose control of their power to reason rationally. The best of intentions could destroy unity within Umno if basic discipline is disregarded.

At the end of the assembly, the Umno Youth had proven that it was, indeed, not afraid of raising issues or eyebrows, that it had the will to speak out its mind and heart's content. Such energy and guts could certainly be used for more productive purposes by both party and Government in efforts to expedite economic recovery. It is hoped that added to the Pemuda's youthful spirit of adventure is a new found wisdom

from the experience of the just-concluded assembly and the lengthy explanation given by the president. It does not pay to forget that the real elements that have contributed to the country's current predicament and the people's growing discomfort are still out there, wreaking havoc on the economy's foundations and causing investors to lose confidence. The war that needs to be waged is not within the party. To fight back the elements that are threatening to drag the country down to its knees, Umno needs to mobilise its entire machinery and lead them out as a united front.

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