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Adaptability vital for Umno to retain support of majority

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AFTER the Second World War, the advent of free elections in Asia saw the prevalence of influential political parties dominating some countries. The Indian Congress Party and the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party are two examples.

Without the Congress or the LDP, there was no Government in those countries. However, with the passages of time, both these political parties lost the support of the people. They did not react quickly enough to a changing economic, social and political climate.

In comparison, Umno and its major coalition partners in Malaysia and also the People's Action Party in Singapore are still going strong for over 40 years now. Today Umno has been able to adapt and secure the support of the majority of the people.

But going into the new millennium Umno has to take stock of the situation carefully. The strength of Umno was based on rural Malays but this situation is changing.

In the peninsula, rural is not as rural anymore. Not only is there an increase in urban Malays but rural Malays are often as mobile and informed as their urban cousins.

With the urbanisation of Bumiputeras and the rapid development of the rural areas the traditional divides in society are also disappearing fast.

Like it or not the flash in the pan of the reformasi folks show that there are substantial numbers who share common fears and hopes - however misled or mistaken those fears may be.

It may not be an unlikely scenario where the urban Bumiputera may turn to any group or party - Keadilan, DAP, Pas or even the MCA Public Complaints Bureau - and not necessarily Umno.

An Umno veteran recalls a rural constituency which had no access to water, power, roads or schools. The people supported Umno and voted for Barisan Nasional in the election and enjoyed rapid development, to an extent that even inaccessible villages became towns, people had cars and houses.

But surprisingly now the same constituency supports Pas strongly. What happened? One explanation is that they got too much development too quickly without having to do too much.

Hence, they do not really appreciate the efforts expended to bring them their comforts. Now they want to get to an even higher level of comfort.

But the resources available are perhaps limited. Therefore, they start looking to Pas for deliverance, the unproven entity which merely exploits their dissatisfactions.

In such a changing scenario, Umno's claim to be the 'payung' of 'ketuanan Melayu' is subject to debate. The exclusivity of the 'payung' may have diminished. Umno must take stock of this.

Umno must also bear in mind that the DAP, Pas, Keadilan etc may one day just chance upon a presentable formula for Malaysians, irrespective of race or religion.

This would be none other than to duplicate the proven and highly successful BN formula. If the Opposition exercises good sense they stand a better chance of duplicating the BN and winning votes but good sense seems hard to come by.

Pas has not exhibited coherence either from an Islamic perspective or from a wider Malaysian perspective but if the more sober leaders in Pas

get to play a larger role in the party, Pas too may evolve into something more palatable.

If Pas does not realise it already, the next general election will probably confirm that Pas has painted itself into a corner with their claims for an `Islamic' state.

People now realise that Pas's version of an Islamic state can be ridiculed to pieces by those who are even a little informed. If Pas can find a face saving method of easing themselves out of this so called `Islamic state' mess, Pas would likely find a larger support base among the populace.

Umno must also come to grips with the fact that politics is still seen as a meal ticket - the means to power and riches. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has warned many times, this will be the downfall of any political party.

When a society has intrinsic social and moral standards, then these values will rise to the top through its culture, politics and other norms. This would be ideal.

However, if a society is still in the process of laying its foundation then it will be necessary for such societies to be told what to do by individual leaders who, hopefully, have the correct ideas.

In terms of providing leadership, it is, therefore, important for Umno to gauge how much the party is driven by the aspirations of its community and how much new impetus it must generate on its own in order to be the prime mover of the community.

Todate we have seen two major events that have affected Umno's collective psyche. One was the breaking away of the Semangat 46 grouping about 10 years ago and second, the present state of agitation caused by the removal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

In both instances, people identify with their chosen hero no matter what the consequences. This could be an overhang from religious and cultural influences. The substance of the matter or the real issues need only be seen through the eyes of the individual.

Unfortunately, mere personality and the form of the matter can easily sway people. And when the idea of Umno as a "meal ticket" is latched on to this "follow the leader come what may" syndrome, then Umno may suffer convulsions from time to time.

The danger here is that if it becomes a recurring malady the people may get tired. It may also undermine the coalition between Umno and the other parties. The Party Bersatu Sabah's tie up with Semangat 46 comes to mind.

A maturing process would require that Umno members follow and understand issues and policies better. A culture of increased dialogue would help sieve out the soap box orators and other artists who may surface from time to time.

An issue that may require Umno to provide strong leadership is religion. Since religion is so sensitive it should never be left to chance or to the whims of those prone to wearing turbans, robes and other such paraphernalia.

Umno should also never fear Pas. What should be highlighted is that while Islam is Islam, Pas remains Pas. There is no necessity to field the ulama as candidates but it will be to Umno's immense benefit if party members are well versed with the teachings of the Quran, even a rudimentary knowledge of which is enough to neutralise Pas and the ulama and also provides good guidance for everyone.

In Japanese politics if anything goes wrong, someone resigns in shame. If a plane crashes, the Minister of Transport may resign. We do not know how this can solve a problem but they can afford to do this because they have a larger pool of talented manpower. We do not have such luxuries.

Hence when we find a good leader it has served us well to keep him in place for some time. But if there is too long a tenure, there is the constant danger of the leader becoming too entrenched.

Not only that but the leader's close supporters may also become entrenched. This by itself need not be a bad thing but the human is a weak animal. Empires and schisms may develop.

Perhaps Umno has come to a stage where the nurturing and accumulation of leadership skills and talent is fairly even. If that is so, Umno may consider limiting the terms of major party posts held by individuals. Or Umno can spearhead to limit the tenure of the Prime Minister's position to not more than two consecutive terms.

There is plenty that Umno can and should think about. The Quran says, "They listen to all views and then follow the best thereof. These are they who are guided. These are the wise." (Surah 39:18).

It would not do any harm for Umno to stop and take careful stock. The new millennium is dawning. The Umno veteran suggests that Umno hire an independent organisation to conduct a comprehensive survey of people's attitudes and feelings towards Umno. Such a survey would be very useful but it must also cover non-Malays and non-party members.

Despite its strong coalition partners, the new millennium may require Umno to cater directly for non-Malays as well. Umno determines the Prime Ministership of the country.

Umno has also provided successful leadership to the whole country very well. In the present circumstances, if Umno were to lose its pole position or if the coalition were to unwind, the country would likely face convulsions.

Therefore, like it or not all Malaysians are stakeholders in the well-being of Umno and vice-versa. This is why a further evolution of Umno may be necessary.

The admission of non-Muslim Bumiputeras into Umno Sabah is proof that Umno is capable of bold moves. The Buddhist Bumiputeras of Thai origin have also been Umno members for a long time.

It would be a good example of tolerance and democracy if non-Bumiputeras are also admitted into Umno someday. Common sense dictates that their numbers have to be limited but if the majority decide to elect a non-Bumiputera as the party president, then so be it.

This is not a new idea. Datuk Onn Jaafar introduced it but too prematurely 50 years ago. The other lesser idea of admitting associate members without party posts sounds dishonest.

The Malays are evolving rapidly. Malaysians, as a whole, are also evolving. Despite shades of intolerance and religious extremism, many convergences are becoming evident.

Umno has exhibited adaptability before. The trend should continue.