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Convincing the young Malay his future is intertwined with Umno

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BRIGHT young men will troop into the Putra World Trade Centre first thing tomorrow morning wearing sharp baju melayu.

Carrying identical bags provided to delegates and amid a sea of black songkok, there will be a sense of unanimity at the proceedings of Umno Youth (Pemuda) assembly.

Traditionally, in fact, it is such awesome unity and cohesiveness of Umno Youth that has made it potent - qualities which are now in big demand as the party faces a general election which opposition parties claim is a mouth-watering prospect for them.

In this, Pemuda's task vis-a-vis the general election is straightforward enough - convince the similarly bright young, driven and somewhat liberated souls that their future is intertwined with Umno's durability.

The work of the Pemuda leaders is cut out because the opposition, namely Pas and the newly-launched Parti Keadilan Nasional, claim to have loyal following among the young.

A recent item on the front page of the Asian Wall Street Journal seeks to confirm this fervent belief of the opposition.

The newspaper quoted several young Malay professionals who said they would vote for any other party, but Umno.

The equally young acting head of Umno Youth, Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, 38, for one, is not dodging the issue.

Pemuda, Hishammuddin admitted, would have to go down and meet this group to listen to their problems.

He succinctly puts it: "Tell us what your grievances are and let's build on that."

In this, a key battleground to win over the young souls is in the burgeoning campuses - an area which an apolitical youth leader said Pemuda hardly treaded in the recent past.

On the contrary, Pas enjoys a rich harvest in the Islamic faculties, especially. "It is their homeground. And Pas kept working on this constituency," said this Youth leader.

An example of such continued effort are the endless Islamic leadership courses for university students organised by Pas.

Also, some of the younger lecturers have been known to be open about their party affiliation and they are looked upon as role models.

Keadilan, said this Youth leader, banks on Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's support in the campus, along with the influence of some of the young leaders in the party headed by Anwar's wife, Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

Where does Umno Youth stand ?

Its rather sad neglect of the campuses was alluded to by a columnist in a Malay daily last Sunday.

The indictment against the Umno Youth is this - a tendency to neglect struggles in favour of politics and business.

Yet, is it too late for Umno Youth to engage this important constituency? Will the present consolidation process in Umno Youth pose an obstacle? Or has the battle just started?

Which is why Umno will focus on something very simple. That is to emphasise that all the economic advancement did not come naturally and the party endured much hardships in the initial struggles in building the nation.

When all these were unfolding, many of those attending tomorrow's Youth Assembly and their peers out there, had not been born.

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out that because Youth members are under 40, none of them experienced living under colonial rule.

"Some think that even if they are broken up into many conflicting parties they will continue to be prosperous as they are now," Dr Mahathir said after addressing last week's launch of Umno Youth's Gerak Gempur, one of its many bids to put things right in as far as the destiny of young voters is concerned.

Continued Dr Mahathir: "It is important for me to remind them that without Umno, they would not be where they are, and without Umno now, their future will be blighted."

Sources said Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was also expected to articulate a similar line of argument when he addresses the joint opening of the Youth and Wanita assemblies tomorrow.

"In essence, Pak Lah (Abdullah) will put forward the argument all this (hard-earned achievements) must not be squandered," said the source.

Thus, in some ways, Umno is persuading the young to pause amid the furious rat race and journeys back to basic Malaysian history.

Another basic political battle cry will also echo throughout the Umno general assembly beginning with Abdullah telling the simultaneous opening of the Youth and Wanita assemblies of need for unity.

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