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Let political clubs be set up in varsities

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PERHAPS a significant focus of the recently concluded Umno General Assembly was the concern expressed by the delegates that educated young Malays were not joining the party in large numbers.

The concern is understandable because no political party can survive for any length of time if it is deprived of a regular injection of new blood.

Umno is a Malay party and the future of the Malays is its paramount objective.

Hence Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his presidential address reminded delegates that the Malays had been oppressed for more than 400 years before Umno came to the rescue in 1946 in order to focus attention on why Umno is relevant for the survival of the Malays in the next millennium.

The question arises how is Umno going to manage sustainable growth with the need to recruit educated young Malays in the context of today's realities.

To begin with, throughout the ages the young have always been anti-establishment.

This attitude may be expressed in many ways like men with long hair or the teddy boys of the 1950s. They just want to be different from their fathers.

It is the same with politics. Taking an interest in politics has its beginnings when the young are at university. They want to change the world and initially express it with being anti-establishment.

When my late father was the Registrar of Societies he sent for me one day. He was obviously agitated about something.

Apparently earlier that day he had received the annual returns of new office bearers of the Socialist Club of University Malaya.

My brother had been elected secretary of the club. In the 1950's the socialists were considered as anti-establishment.

I told my father that to be a socialist at 21 was a healthy sign but if at 40, then may be it would be of some concern. He relented.

Upon graduation, my brother joined the Foreign Service and retired recently as Malaysia's Ambassador to the United States, none the worse for his socialist views at university.

A delegation of Malayan students met the late Tun H.S. Lee, then the Finance Minister in London.

We tried to persuade him what Malaya's economic policy ought to be after independence.

He said our ideas were that of socialists but we would change upon returning home when we faced reality.

As an example he said that the late Tun Ismail Ali was also a socialist in his youth but he turned out to be the ideal Governor of the Central Bank.

The late Tun Abdul Razak was a member of the Fabian Society during his student days in London.

The society was founded in Britain in 1883 to promote the gradual spread of democratic socialism with the strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with the State.

Many Malayan students at the time were influenced by Professor Harold Laski (1893-1950) of the London School of Economics.

He was a socialist and political theorist. One cannot say, however that

Tun Abdul Razak was a socialist Prime Minister!.

The most fertile ground to recruit educated young people to a political party must obviously be the university campuses in the country and abroad.

That is why there are 29 Umno Clubs at universities worldwide. But there are no such clubs in Malaysian universities.

The Prime Minister said that if Umno clubs are allowed to be formed in local universities then other political parties should also be allowed to do so.

Taking an interest in politics should be distinguished from taking an active part in partisan politics.

For years the Government policy has been that students at universities should concentrate on their studies.

Partisan politics is for those who have graduated. The policy however has actually worked against Umno.

The truth of the matter is that Malaysian university students like their compatriots in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, India, Indonesia and Thailand are political activists.

A total ban on partisan politics would appear to be ignoring the reality of political awareness and activism of university students.

But the activism subsists nonetheless through for example, the Students Representative Council of each university.

It is understood that 10 out of 11 such councils are dominated by supporters of Pas. To be sure, on the quiet, there are also supporters of Umno and of other political groups on local university campuses.

The solution perhaps is to allow political activity to be in the open and permit the free establishment of political clubs in our local universities.

Let such clubs be part of university education for those who are politically inclined.

They will learn to respect the views of others whilst forming life-long friendships of having belonged to the same alma mater.

The university is the ideal place to cultivate the practice of parliamentary democracy.

Under existing conditions, subversion and surreptitiousness have crept into the university culture.

This is not a healthy development but arises because the human spirit can never be suppressed.

If restriction there be, their activism should be confined to the campus and certainly not by participating in political demonstrations in public.

Umno knows we reap what we sow.

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