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The old, young and new faces

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HAVE been part of Umno since boyhood. The paternal side of my family has always been so since Umno's inception in 1946; the maternal side switched to PAS in the 1959 general election.

Today the large extended family is divided into three Malay political divides. The third group supports the fledgling party Keadilan. However, the bulk remains in Umno. Their familiarity with the party (and its proud history) draws only affection and devotion out of them.

Last month I attended my first Umno general assembly since becoming Special Envoy to the United Nations three years ago. An all-time record number of delegates (2045), thousands of the faithful, even more supporters not excluding non-party people who crowded every nook and corner of the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC), which now seems small for a big assembly, heard the party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his disciples and delegates exorcise the Anwar ghost and Abim phantoms and urge them not to forget the past hardships, the degradation of the Malays by the British and the near-loss of Malay political power.

Dr Mahathir reminded them of the sacrifices made by and for the bumiputra and the other races and warned them unless they became self-reliant, worked harder and remained united and strong they might in time become a victim of neo-colonialism. It was a stirring call, an unprecedented speech to the 53rd Umno general assembly and its last this century.

As Dr Mahathir walked to the lectern the packed assembly rose to give him a standing ovation and when he finished more than a good hour later he was rewarded with a warm applause interrupted occasionally by shouts of "Hidup Mahathir - long live Mahathir".

The Party seemed to have rallied behind Mahathir and was eager to do battle with new and old foes. It was a remarkable show which must be translated into actions, deeds and results. It was an amazing display of determination to the run-up of the much talked and much-predicted 10th general election. Umno will have to work harder than it ever has in the past to win handsomely this time. As Dr Mahathir has himself said, the forthcoming election is going to be rough even dirty because the opposition, inspired and supported by foreign supported friends, is determined to wrest power (PAS and Keadilan) whilst the DAP is more realistic: it just wants to deny the Umno-led Barisan Nasional capturing two-thirds majority. The smaller opposition parties are irrelevant. Smart campaigning, the calibre of candidates, the Party's credibility, past experience and history will, I maintain, determine who gets what. The opposition may not work out as well as it expects to and therefore will likely achieve less than it hopes for. The ruling party, on the other hand, should not start with overconfidence. I know BN will win, it has done so nine times before; ten times if you count the first federal election held two years before Merdeka. BN's greatest flaw will be complacency and failing to grasp history and our changing situation. I met and engaged with a number of delegates and leaders during the three-day conference. I tried to feel their feelings as close as I could and absorbed them. Some were hard-nosed "professionals" who swore they would do what it takes and I know some have the character to do what it takes to achieve the desired results. A few are overly upbeat, too sanguine and rather remote from what is happening on the ground. If I may

be allowed to state they were even unrealistic and disconnected from reality; a rather frightening thought with a reverse arrogance of the foreign media, opposition, Anwar, Western diplomats and observers and NGOs combined!

I encountered briefly during the tea-break on the first day of the assembly two members of the two families that have been at the centre of Malaysian and Umno politics for a half century. Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein and Mokhzani Mahathir. I managed - by chance - to exchange a few words with a third whose family is also a major force in Malaysian politics, Datuk Seri Najib Razak as he escorted his wife to their car.

First Hishamuddin, simply because I bumped into him first. I had only spoken to him seriously once at his office last year. I was pleased, in this setting, to continue engaging him. He appears earnest; serving the Party for the right reason rather than because Umno is the Party of his illustrious grandfather, Datuk Sir Onn bin Jaafar and father (third prime minister). There is a world of difference between Onn's time (even when Hussein was the leader of Umno) and now, but some things never change - that is to uplift the economic and social status of the bumiputra; to close the gap between them and the fast-track non-bumiputra Malaysians which I maintain should be the agenda and other big concerns as we go into the new millennium. Of course, included in the agenda are integrity, transparency and decency to the process of economic and political advancement. The leaders must serve for the right reason, which is nation above self and communal interests.

Hishamuddin is like Texas Governor, George W. Bush, eldest son of President George Bush in two respects, I think. Like W (as Bush junior is fondly called) who wants to be America's 43rd president, Hishamuddin also wants eventually to become Prime Minister and secondly if people who know both compare Hishamuddin with his father he would come out favourably, and I believe, if Tun Hussein were alive, he would accept it as a fact and if Hishamuddin comes out unfavourably he should also accept the verdict. For W the comparison is worse because his father is alive. Both have strengths and weaknesses and though it is still a long way before the presidential election is held (November 2000) W is in a commanding lead against his likely Democratic rival Vice-President Al Gore, the champion of Malaysian reformasi movement. According to American polls if the presidential election were held last week, Bush would have thrashed Gore by 54 per cent to 38 per cent.

Another Umno Youth leader who is in a remarkable situation is the blessed Mokhzani who is married to a Johore girl with an impeccable Umno background. Mokhzani, like Hishamuddin, is a young man to watch. He is in a position where he can, if he has political savvy, his dad's political skill and mom's charm, influence his own political future to end up in a position of influence.

The oldest of three scions (of Malay political dynasties) is Najib. Already entrenched as Minister of Education and Vice-President of Umno he appears at last to have a happy home. He is destined, all being well, to be Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi's deputy if Badawi succeeds Dr Mahathir. In the new century - when I expect change in leadership will take place - political circumstances would have changed dramatically following the general election.

I only managed to shake hands with Badawi - no words exchanged - as he strode towards the platform from the backstage, deep in thought, perhaps thinking and writing in his mind what to say in his winding-up speech. It is no question that Badawi is a lucky person. I listened to his "inaugural remarks" at the joint Pemuda and Wanita opening ceremony and I must confess I have listened to better speeches by him in and outside Umno and

Parliament. His speech writers should have used short sentences ... easier to deliver even more it would have been better if he were to write his own speeches as his boss (Dr Mahathir) does. His debut should have been better prepared even rehearsed.

Like these blessed persons I am grateful that I was blessed with a family that has given me much love; raised by another who taught me the value of education - and made sure that I got a very good education. The Umno-led Government provided me, as it has for thousands of others, access to previously unavailable political opportunities and to others more fortunate access to economic and financial openings, also previously unaccessible.

History and biographies teach us much. But do most of us read them? I have read a bit of both. I have read about people's faith, their belief, their strengths and downsides. I want to recommend if they have not started on this course for Hishammuddin, Mokhzani and Najib to read about the story of King Solomon.

As for Badawi he needs to galvanise and inspire ... and as for the numerous other "old faces" I met (both friends and foes) I want to single out two, looking forlornly as if regretting missed opportunities, one caused by his unmistakable natural arrogance and the other by his mere stupidity and naivety.

The Umno-led Barisan Nasional must see to it that in the next millennium every Malaysian of promise gets the education and access to opportunity in the multi-corridor society we are building.

On the last day of the assembly (Sunday, June 20) the packed Dewan Merdeka rose to sing in succession, the Umno's theme song "Sedia Berkhidmat ...", the salawat (hymns praising Prophet Muhammad) and the Negaraku, then cheering the Party's commander-in-chief, the familiar figure, with the acclamation of "Hidup Mahathir", "Hidup Umno", "Hidup Melayu" and "Hidup Malaysia".

I hurriedly left the hall feeling extremely good: may Umno live 100 years and more to lead Malaysians of all races to achieve equal success and opportunity and outcomes if that is possible.

As I walked to my Proton Perdana sandwiched between a Jaguar and a Porsche in the sea of Mercedes and BMWs, I became more aware that in a global village politics and governance would be fundamentally different from the Malaysian and Umno practices of yesterday. Umno will and must approach the future with an open mind and imagination, not from a position of fear. Today's Umno is more broad-based than it was in 1957 when I first reported on the general assembly for the then Straits Times (new NST). Then there was a mere 157 delegates. The increase in participation shows the level of political maturity that we now have. Umno has a good story to tell if it knows how to spin it.

I saw and met many determined and intelligent young men and women - not yet prominent - at the general assembly who are ready to take up the challenges in the new century that of good governance, greater democratisation, as well as more accountability and transparency for as long as all this does not risk Malay political primacy or as a Malaysian Chinese political analyst insists to me ... as long as Umno remains the bulwark of bumiputra political power and the source of bumiputra dominance (ketuanan Bumiputra-Melayu). Amen.

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