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Will Umno's pragmatism and past adaptability be enough?

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AS Umno steps into the new millennium, it faces a time that is both difficult and painful. Although the Greek philosopher Heraclitus reminded us long ago that change is a permanent feature of life, the changes that Umno has to make now to cope with a new fast changing reality, are of a more profound nature than before.

It is not that Umno has not changed since its founding in 1946. Being a pragmatic party, it has made many changes, some of them major.

The decision to share power and therefore the country, with other races, was a profound one.

The New Economic Policy enunciated after the May 13, 1969 riots is another major change, along with the National Education Policy and a new non-aligned foreign policy, all made under the late Tun Abdul Razak.

It is because of its pragmatism and adaptability that Umno has lasted for so long.

Now, on the threshold of a new century and a new millennium, pregnant with and promising earth-shaking changes, will Umno's past pragmatism and adaptability be enough?

Being a Malay party, it carries with it the burdens of Malay society.

Unquestioning loyalty to the leader, is aphorised in the Malay saying, Adat Melayu pantang durhaka (it is not in the Malay character to disobey the ruler).

This pithy saying comes directly from the Malay feudal society of the past.

Of course, feudalism in our society is on the way out. Natural law requires that when we remove something, we have to replace it with something else.

Although change is a natural process, it does not follow that any and every change is better than the system it replaces.

Umno and the Malays must see to it that the change they are bringing about, is a change for the better.

Indeed, we may make a change for the worse. If we do, we invite our own doom.

The Western-educated liberals among us, want to replace the present system with Western liberal democratic values.

Thus, the clamour that we hear for more democratic rights and more human rights for the past several months.

But is this change good for us? If it is good, is it good the whole way? In what way is it good and in what way it is not?

The more religiously-inclined among us want an Iranian-type of government and system to be instituted, complete with hudud laws and the segregation of women.

They arrogate to themselves the power not only to interpret religion, but also to lead and govern. Is this what Islam stands for?

It is precisely because the Umno president and the country's Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad, himself a devout Muslim and a Muslim thinker to boot, has stood in their way that they want to remove him.

Will Umno and the Malays choose either of the two alternatives above, or an uneasy combination of the two, or is there a better way?

These are extremely important questions and Umno and the Malays must answer them quickly and in a satisfactory way.

There is no running away from the fact that man is endowed with freedom of choice that is not given to lower forms of life, like animals and trees.

It is in this freedom of choice that he faces his ultimate dilemma. That is why in the Quran, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were advised against approaching the Tree of Knowledge, for, in that knowledge, he will free himself from the constraints of nature.

He will be free to choose between right and wrong. It was a moment of great decision and we know that he chose freedom.

As the atheistic French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, has negatively put it, Man has condemned himself to freedom.

The Malays now have to face such choices. How do we choose a leader? Do we choose a leader who calls us to sacrifice and work for the greater glory of the nation?

Or, do we choose a leader who promises us money and material comforts? Or yet, do we choose a "religious" leader who denounces material comforts and calls us to strive for the Hereafter?

It is a choice not quite so easy to make. It is a deep philosophical question.

For decades, Malaysians have enjoyed peace, political stability and comparative material comforts.

Umno's pragmatism and concern for Malay political power contributed to that.

At the same time, Umno's early nationalist struggles have lost much of its relevance to the post-Economic-Policy generation.

Many of Umno's leaders have become rich and comfortable and their idealism has waned.

Struggle for power and riches has replaced nationalist idealism. This is the main reason why Dr Mahathir does not relish Umno elections and has postponed the 1999 party polls to after the general elections.

However bad and destructive party life, infested with "money politics" can become, party life, with its meetings and elections, is the only way through which the general members' aspirations regarding policy and leaders can be expressed and realised.

All politicians have to live with this. But party life need not and certainly should not destroy Umno and, through Umno, the Malaysian nation that is in the making.

In fact, party life can be invigorating. A way must be devised through which party life, with its endless meetings, deliberations and strife, must not only NOT destroy Umno, but must positively protect, serve and build the Malays and the nation to be great and strong.

As President Saddam Hussein's Iraq has shown, this is altogether possible, even under the greatest pressure from Anglo-American neo-imperialism.

The greatest of man's assets is his mind. Although the Malay mind is at present tinged with feudalism and religious traditionalism, it can be educated and trained with the teachings of God in the Quran.

These teachings, properly administered, are like a fresh water bath. It can simultaneously clean the body, the mind and the soul of the Malay.

For a start, Umno must make him understand that economic and material life are as important as spiritual life.

There can be no spiritual life and no heaven apart from his having a proper material and economic life in this world.

This must become part of the party's teaching, buttressed by arguments from the Quran, from history and from reason.

But this materialism is not for materialism's sake; it should be for moral and spiritual greatness.

The mansion that we build is not for an opportunistic individual's or clique's quest for power, glory and hedonistic pleasure, but for the nation's honour and for homage to God, the Supreme Sovereign of the universe.

Umno leaders and members must be taught in the party school "to fight for the good, and to forbid evil" (a Quranic phrase for a leader's motto in life).

This is an extremely important principle for Umno and for the Malays to imbibe into their political life.

A healthy intellectual culture must be fostered and developed in Umno, in Malay society and in the nation.

The application of such a policy in Umno would have avoided the keen and painful ideological and power struggles of the like that we had seen in 1987-88 when Umno was deregistered.

This freedom to criticise and to discuss rationally must be distinguished from the Western liberal "freedom" (actually licence) that is being propagated to us by some quarters.

The freedom to criticise by reason is far, far different from the freedom to cause havoc through the turning of truth upside down.

The understanding of this concept of freedom is crucial to Umno's and the Malays's future.

The principle of justice is well-known in Malay-Islamic political culture.

Raja adil raja disembah; raja zalim raja disanggah (The just ruler is obeyed; the unjust disobeyed), is a Malay saying that surely must have come with the best traditions of Islamic jurisprudence.

This comes directly from the divine command in the Quran to be just when anyone of us judges.

This principle must be strengthened in Umno. It must be taught to the members and they must practise it.

Bureaucracy, whether of Government or party, is always cumbersome. It impedes action and progress.

But we cannot privatise the Government for the simple reason that it is entrusted with the power and authority to protect the weak in society.

Thus, Umno and the Malays must also devise a way by which Government and party bureaucracy will not impede our efforts at nation-building.

Both a correct philosophy of life and a united and strong desire to continuously build the nation of Malaysia in the community of nations of the wider world, must be the bedrock upon which Umno and the Malays must make the necessary changes to guard and protect their future.

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