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Announcement of proposed Umno amendments for reforms

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UMNO is, undoubtedly, on its way to reforming itself though the road seems a long one.

On Monday the Umno Supreme Council decided on several amendments to the party constitution. Of significance is the proposal to set up Puteri Umno as a separate entity from Wanita Umno. Another is the proposal to align the term of office of Umno supreme council members with that of Dewan Rakyat members by holding the Umno elections within 12 months after the general election.

After much enthusiasm on the need for reformation of the party, the announcement on the proposed amendments seemed a bit of a letdown.

One is reminded of indications that changes were "radical" and that the exercise to amend the constitution was the "most comprehensive" in its 54-year history.

When Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, an Umno vice-president appointed to head the 10-member committee to study the (party) constitutional amendments, began his tour of the country to gain feedback from the grassroots, he must have been overwhelmed by what he described as the "consensus" on the need to re-engineer the party by making it more effective and attractive to the younger generation. He said response from Umno members were positive with the majority wanting to make Umno relevant to the Malays of today.

Muhyiddin was echoing the sentiments of a large section of Umno members and the Malays of the need to plug holes in the constitution which had allowed the practice of money politics which is the root of the problem of the party that had rendered it unpopular with some Malays.

Therefore, the exercise to gain feedback on what amendments the members wanted was simply that - the leadership needed to know what they were.

It was clear that the grassroots wanted empowerment. Many were on common ground in calling for elections of the party supreme council to be held at the divisional level and not during the party general assembly.

One main reason they wanted this was that the practice of money politics could be prevented.

It would mean that the number of delegates would increase from 2,000 to 30,000 as all division committee members were eligible voters. Members saw it as a way to make it harder for candidates to buy votes.

This proposal seemed too drastic and many Umno members while enthusiastic about it still felt that it would be rejected.

They were right. Citing technical and logistical problems, Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said it was not possible to have elections at the divisional level. Besides, he added there was no guarantee that there would be no money politics if divisions chose the top leaders.

The holding of the Umno elections within 12 months after the general election which brings the term of supreme council and members of Parliament in alignment is new.

But according to an Umno member there is already a provision in the party constitution that allows for the party elections to be held 18 months after the general election.

So what is the impact of holding Umno elections once every four (or a maximum of five) years after the general election?

The rationale for this was the need to synchronise Umno elections -

supreme council and divisional. It was felt that party elections were held separately but in close proximity. There were grouses that Umno members were "politicking too much".

But an Umno divisional leader said that holding the Umno election once in four or five years (according to the term of Parliament), would only make the contest keener or worse, make the fighting more intense.

But others see differently saying that this will allow Umno to concentrate on serving the rakyat and on activities which benefit the people.

Muhyiddin is probably expecting disappointment and possibly much criticism from members. Nevertheless, they can still make themselves heard as the proposals will be submitted to the 165 divisions for feedback and evaluation.

A significant development in all this is the proposal to set up Puteri Umno, a subject of much controversy particularly on the age limit and structure.

The proposal to establish Puteri Umno is to attract young women to the party. Details have not been decided except that it will be separate from Wanita Umno with its leader becoming an automatic supreme council member.

The other proposals the Umno supreme council has decided to push for are the setting up of an independent disciplinary board in place of its disciplinary committee and the appointment of Umno MPs and state assemblymen as ex-officio committee members at their respective divisions.

There was also hope that the supreme council would agree to the scrapping of the system of candidates for the party's top posts having to secure a minimum number of votes in order to qualify for contest.

When members made this proposal, it was to simplify the requirements for members to qualify as candidates and making the party more democratic with mass participation because Umno is a mass party and not elitist.

This system was actually established to counter what was felt was the widespread practice of money politics.

Moreover, the party wanted only serious contenders in the elections.

Come Nov 18, Umno delegates will gather for the special assembly to deliberate on these proposed amendments.

There are already grouses on the ground that the proposals accepted by the council will not make much difference to the party.

"Where is the zest and zeal to see real change? To endear the party to the grassroots, to the Malays, to make it less elitist, to have mass participation. Where is the top-down and bottom-up approach?"

"Have we plugged the holes? Can we make Umno relevant now?" asked an Umno member.

Still, it would be wrong to say that the Umno leadership is not listening. The fact that the 10-member committee Muhyiddin headed has collected feedback nationwide is a good beginning.

Clearly, reforming the party is not only through a process of amending the constitution. Certainly this is not an end in itself. It is more than a starting point to making Umno more democratic, more appealing and more open.

Structural changes cannot be enough.

A mammoth party like Umno with a 2.7 million membership indeed will need time to make those radical changes. The road is long but Umno can shorten it. It cannot be any easier but it is a challenge that Umno has no choice but to take up before it is too late and before the problems become insurmountable.

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