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Between middle-of-the-road Umno and Malay middle-class

Abdullah Ahmad

THE New Economic Policy (NEP) created a small class of wealthy Bumiputeras and a big Bumiputera middle-class that was developing fast until the Asian economic crisis. Umno is paying for its own success.

The middle and professional class is by and large a bit disenchanted. Great efforts are planned and will be executed to win them back. The Umno-led Government was focussed and dynamic. The party - sans dissidents - made it possible.

Tan Sri Musa Hitam, in a speech in Johor Baru earlier this year, asked: What happened to Umno? He answered the question himself; that the party he loved, he asserted, was (and is) dependent on Chinese support.

Musa stated that there was nothing wrong in that. Indeed, he welcomed the Chinese support, except that it occurred at a time when many Bumiputeras were deserting Umno and supporting rival Malay parties (Pas and Keadilan, and even DAP).

He wanted Umno to re-examine itself before it became irrelevant, although other less charitable critics claimed that Umno is already so.

It would appear to me that as long as Malaysian politics is based on race; Umno, MCA, MIC and other ethnic-based parties will remain relevant. Umno was formed to oppose the Malayan Union in 1946; and to counter-balance it, Datuk Tan Cheng Lock set up MCA with the blessings of the British in 1949.

Umno's founding president, Datuk Onn bin Jaafar, left the party in 1951 when he failed in his attempt (goaded by the British) to open the party's membership to all races, an idea that was ahead of its time and still is.

Onn's multi-racial Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) failed whilst Umno, which he predicted would collapse, thrived under Onn's successor, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, under whose leadership Malaya gained Independence in 1957.

Tun Razak Abdul Hussein who took over from Tunku in 1970 - following a vicious race riot in Kuala Lumpur the year before - introduced the NEP. He died in 1976 and was succeeded by Datuk Hussein Onn who maintained the policy.

And when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Umno president and Prime Minister in 1981, the NEP was enlarged and vigorously implemented.

National unity can only be maintained for any period of time - I am convinced - by a coalition of racial interests, rather than an Islamic party or the non-racial approach which a minority of Malaysians favour. Umno will not fail as wished by its opponents.

Malaysians should instead be worried and deeply concerned about the use of Islamic extremism in Kelantan, Terengganu and pockets of Malay population in other states which has widened the Malay divide. Left unchecked, this could adversely affect racial and cultural relations, and harmony.

Songkoks off to Umno. It has been returned to power with two-thirds majority since 1959, a record that is surpassed only by PAP in the south which has won every election, also since 1959, with a thumping regularity (of almost 100 per cent success each time).

Of course, neither Umno nor Dr Mahathir is infallible. The voters recognise this, yet time and again they re-elect the Umno-led coalition and communal parties which make up Barisan Nasional - and for good reason. They believed, and still do, that only Umno can guarantee racial harmony,

religious tolerance, and protect the settled sensitive issues and the basic rights of non-Muslims.

The Umno presidential election on May 11 may appear, on the surface, rather tame. I found out last week that on the contrary it is quietly intense, escalated by the existence of "two camps" where votes are being pursued vigorously over breakfasts, lunches, dinners and suppers.

The "two camps" are Group 5 and Group 7, which I was told by several delegates, were campaigning independently of each other.

Group 5 is made up of Umno division leaders - chairman, deputy chairman, vice-chairman, and Youth and Wanita chiefs - who are automatic delegates to the Umno general assembly. Group 7, on the other hand, comprises those elected by the delegates conference.

An eastern state delegate told me that in his division, of the 12 delegates, three are youths - Ketua Pemuda (automatic) and two others elected by the delegates conference.

If what happened in his division is repeated among the 165 Umno divisions, as he believes to be the case, it means the presence of a sizeable youth representation among this year's 2,017 delegates.

Umno started as the party for all Malays with civil servants and farmers providing the strength, and the Malay school teachers held sway for more than two decades. As the NEP gained momentum, the Malay professionals and "Melayu Baru" took over until the advent of the Umno-Abim-Islamists which saw the meteoric rise of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Then came the crash in 1998.

Umno minus Anwar and his followers is back to where it was following the NEP period albeit with poorer Bumiputeras. It should now find "peace and stability" with the top two leadership well-entrenched.

And really, few Umno members are holding their breath for the vice presidential race for none of the nine qualified candidates outshines the other. There is a manifestation of commonness, the last century version, amongst them. They are all eminently qualified to be in Umno's third echelon.

Two decades ago, at the height of the Cold War, many concerned Americans funded various anti-communist studies on how to fight the red menace. On the other hand, official America and the doves held the view that US should do its utmost to co-exist peaceably with the Soviet Union, believing that the American people were in any case not capable of mounting a serious challenge to the Soviet system. Of course, they were wrong. The Americans buried Russian communism in 1990.

Likewise, the wish of some people seeking to rally Malaysians to ditch Umno is quixotic. They may cause more problems for Umno but none that the party cannot overcome.

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