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End to money politics

THE Umno general assembly, which opens today, is much more than a race for the vice presidency, although the election is also extremely significant in determining the leadership succession for the party and the country. The first assembly in the new millennium, the gathering is being held after a general election that saw the Barisan Nasional retaining its two-thirds majority but losing a second state to the Opposition. The economy is well on recovery from the region's worst financial crisis but with that recovery socio-political diseases like money politics have resurfaced, forcing Umno to once again combat the cancer, this time clearly with greater urgency.

If not dealt with effectively, this corrupt practice will be the reason for the party's further decline. That, subsequently, will weaken the Barisan Nasional and that the party leadership cannot allow to happen. The buck must stop this week at the general assembly. Party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has gone to great length to make sure that both candidates and delegates behave. He even had to bar candidates from direct contact with delegates so as to protect their own integrity. Last week he went on to order home the delegates who had come to Kuala Lumpur way ahead of the general assembly because he realised that their presence here could be misunderstood. Despite all these precautions, Dr Mahathir said after the supreme council meeting last Sunday that he was still getting reports about political bribery ahead of the party elections.

The message to the Umno delegates and leaders to be conveyed at the assembly this week is expected to be loud and clear. It has to be made loud and clear. Over the years, this tumour within the party has grown to an alarming size and needs to be removed quickly. If the members do not act quickly and firmly, it can be life-threatening. But unlike the treatment for cancer, there will not be negative side effects to Umno if it rids itself of leaders and members who are not willing to cleanse themselves of this practice. It will not harm the party to go after the hardcore practitioners of money politics, now and after the general assembly. Those who win the elections because of this corrupt practice should be disqualified if it can be proven that they did so by bribing delegates. Similarly, delegates involved should be punished heavily. If they are allowed to get off scot-free, the cancer will spread quickly and by the next general assembly would have reached a very advanced stage.

Umno needs to get money politics out of the way to be able to pursue the Malay and national agenda. There is the issue of globalisation and liberalisation, which will challenge and threaten every aspect of Malaysian life and culture. The Opposition's politics of hatred which has produced street demonstrations and a propaganda of lies against the Government on the Internet as well as the resurgence of Pas' restrospective brand of Islam are breaking up Malaysian unity. It also rests on Umno's shoulders to lead the Barisan Nasional efforts to wrest back Terengganu and Kelantan from the Opposition by the next general election.

Umno has been instrumental in taking back the country from the British and then transforming Malaysia from a country that has little other than primary commodities to a dynamic and confident nation that has set 2020 as the year it will join the ranks of the developed countries. There is much

work to be done to make that happen and if Umno cannot do it, no other political entity in this country can. There will always be one or two bad apples in its bunch that need to be removed, lest they cause the whole tree to rot. The measures which have been taken within the party to arrest the problem should bear fruits in good time. What it needs to do is to continue pressing the message home and, if necessary, act against the errant and the unscrupulous to show everyone that the party means business and that Umno will not spare anyone who uses the party for himself instead of for king and country.

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