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Engaging the disengaged

WISDOM does not dwell within a single perspective. This is the driving factor behind Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for party leaders to have more dialogues and closer interaction, even open and constructive criticism of himself and others, with the people including civil servants, intellectuals, university students and the Press.

This is essential for the survival of the party and ultimately, the struggle of the Malays. As asserted by Dr Mahathir, Umno is facing a hostile environment where freedom's children - the post-Independence and post-NEP generations - seem to defy an appreciation of the party and all that it stands for and mocks the attempts to inject pre-Independence nostrums such as the anti-colonialism struggle to 21st century concerns. The party, too, is embroiled in an adversary system characterised by raw partisan opposition for opposition's sake, mindless negation of the Barisan Nasional-led Government, emotional over-simplification of complex issues and the cult of yea-boo macho expression among young Malays. Some young, professional voters are unconstrained by ties of loyalty, what more gratitude.

Partisan dealignment and political deviance from the party may not be large enough to render it as historical excrement or puncture its relevance but they have cracked the pillars of its eminence. Umno is at a crossroads. This may not be acutely felt by members who nestled in the warmth of party solidarity at the general assembly. But it is felt by others - the silent, the disillusioned and the disengaged. These are the people who must be reached and be persuaded of the relevance of Umno's struggle in this age, not penalised or marginalised. Nor should the machinery of Government be mucked around to punish those civil servants whose perceptions of Umno have been coloured by blind hatred, distrust and prejudice.

It is a travesty to pretend that all dissatisfaction of the party and leaders can be lumped into plain opposition or anti-establishment. These are different perspectives in need of clarification and understanding and surely, they deserve to be heard in the name of party democracy. Continuous dialogues are the key to making sense of the hostile milieu in which Umno operates and importantly, the defining essence of what viable and healthy party democracy is all about. This will dislodge the perception that Umno has become elitist.

The party's struggle should not be deemed completed because the Malays can boast of a fleet of Mercs. Crass materialism has never been the aim of Umno. The purity of its struggle must be restored so that none will forfeit the party's integrity for all that glitters as some may turn out to be a chimera that cloaks the seeds of destruction. The revival of Umno hinges on the ability of the new leadership to coalesce a bold political action to eradicate money politics and other forms of malaise within the party. It must stitch the fragments of disunity and bridge the gap between espoused ideals and actual practice.

True, Umno is responsible for the Malays' progress. But this is no reason for smug self-satisfaction. As observed by Montesquieu, institutions perish from their success. Umno has been a success and a return to the purity of its struggle will ensure continuing success. Complacency, self-absorption and short-sighted entrapment in an

inward-looking party are destructive.
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