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Focus on party-hoppers and coming Umno polls

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DURING the Sabah elections early last year, frogs almost became Parti Bersatu Sabah's mascot.

PBS leaders and candidates kept calling many of the Barisan Nasional candidates, who used to be their members, frogs for crossing over to the enemy.

So extensive was the use of the frog analogy that many Sabahans became emotional about the betrayal, refusing to see that it was actually another political ploy to gain power.

Now, that period in time has become history.

Sabahans will now realise that even those who shouted "frog" loudest of their opponents have ended up becoming one themselves, as seen in the recent crossover by six PBS assemblymen to BN.

The point here is that the longer the time that has elapsed, the more things fall into proportion, or so said a famous writer.

It is a human fallacy to want to pass quick judgement on issues and sometimes, due to the hastiness, the bigger picture is ignored in the interest of a few.

The Umno supreme council's no-contest advice for the president and deputy president posts is another noteworthy example.

When the advice was made, an unending stream of criticism from within Umno and without poured in.

Now, with that period in time having elapsed, it is obvious there was more to the advice than met the eye.

It has enabled Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to crack the whip, at least in so far as Umno is concerned, from a position of more authority and acceptance.

Dr Mahathir is not only the undisputed leader of the party, but he has cleared whatever uncertainties there were surrounding leadership succession as Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is now unchallenged for the deputy presidency.

Now, the party chief has taken things one step further: ensuring candidates for the Umno elections, people who are going to be leaders of the post-Mahathir era, are not money-politic ogres.

This is explained by the exercise where the candidates - for the vice-presidency, Wanita and deputy Wanita chief posts and deputy Youth chief posts, all 15 of them - signed a pledge to stop campaigning and dabbling in money politics or any other corrupt practice.

The pledge, signed on Monday night with Dr Mahathir as the witness, binds them until the Umno elections on May 10 and 11.

In short, the candidates will not be allowed to communicate, directly, or indirectly by using their agents, with the delegates.

And the circumstances leading to this episode can indeed be incriminating - there have been numerous reports of candidates spending money to buy votes and delegates going up to candidates literally selling their votes.

In other words, despite the numerous warnings and action taken against candidates in previous years for indulging in money politics, some delegates and candidates are obviously still "smitten" with the practice.

The issue of money politics has been repeatedly discussed and punishment duly meted out.

In 1994, the party held an extraordinary general assembly purely to

discuss money politics following reports of extensive indulgence in the practice in the previous year's Umno elections.

Delegates to this extraordinary meeting confessed to receiving cash, handphones (which were then quite rare) and other kinds of material gifts in return for votes.

The delegates and party leaders then collectively pledged to put their heart and soul into stopping the money-politic hydra from spreading its tentacles.

The practice persisted, however, and in the 1996 party elections, several candidates were disqualified for money politics.

As such, although Dr Mahathir's order, that the candidates pledge to steer clear of campaigning and money politics, is unconventional and drastic, many tend to be sceptical of the move ever achieving its desired result.

Dr Mahathir himself hinted at this when he said: "I am not convinced that there will be no campaigns (in next month's elections). But if I find that there are, I will expose the person who is campaigning at the general assembly."

It is, in essence, a move to ensure Umno continues with its political comeback after the battering it took during the last general elections.

Having led the country to an economic turnaround, the time has come for Umno to stage a political turnaround. (Victory in the Sanggang by-election on April 1 2000 signalled the start of this).

The only way for the party to achieve this is to negate the bad image it has been labelled with and that means killing corrupt practices and money politics.

Dr Mahathir and the rest of the Umno family have come to terms with the fact that it is perceptions which are actually making it difficult for the party to be accepted as the ultimate Malay political vehicle.

There is no doubt that the move to stop candidates for Umno's top posts from campaigning will be questioned in terms of democratic values.

But the fact remains that the party members who complain about the lack of democracy in Umno are probably the same ones who indulge in all the undemocratic ethics vis-a-vis money politics.

As put across by an ardent supporter of the no-contest advice: "It's all about economics for some of these members. The reason these people want contests is simple...the more contenders, the higher the value they can put on their votes." That is the delegates.

Then, there will be candidates who will complain that such a directive makes it difficult for them to articulate their visions and agenda for the party.

Others will lament that they do not have the executive position to get delegates to realise what stuff they are made off.

Then, some will point fingers at others for using money to secure votes and the accused will then turn around and make a similar accusation of the accuser.

This thing will go round and round until in the end, every candidate, going by the accusations and counter-accusations, is corrupt and practising money politics.

Alas, these candidates may be no better than the name-calling PBS leaders.

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