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Heed the leaders' message

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"FIGHTING for a cause is a religious obligation (ibadah). Fighting for a cause with sincerity is a religious obligation. In the final analysis, man's integrity is measured in terms of his accountability to Allah s.w.t. Man's intentions, good or bad, cannot be hidden from Allah s.w.t. This is the form and shape of the struggle that we should strive to make a culture in Umno." - Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, deputy president of Umno in his winding-up speech at the 54th Umno General Assembly on May 13, 2000.

In the euphoria over the party elections, the message in this one paragraph of the Umno deputy president's speech may have been lost. Of those that listened and heard, some may have viewed it as a sermon. Some may view it as stating the obvious.

But the message was not lost on Parti Islam which immediately reacted in its online party newspaper, Harakah, quoting one of its leaders as saying Umno would not succeed in turning its struggle into a religious obligation because Umno was a secular party.

Umno has been in existence for 54 years and has ruled the country, together with its coalition partners, since independence in 1957. For all its shortcomings, Umno and its leadership have always proffered an image of a party of Muslims as opposed to the fire spewing, sword brandishing image of Islam espoused by Pas. Much as the majority of Malaysians accept and support the face of Islam as embraced by Umno, the recent general election results showed that there was a weakening of Malay support for the party. Thus, when the media, Umno delegates and the country focused their attention on who won and who lost, the most important and underlying message escaped their notice. But Pas noticed.

Umno's strength has always been its moderate stance, be it towards Islam or towards inter-racial relationships. This stance has stridently been espoused by previous presidents, starting from Dato Onn Jaafar, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn and for the last 19 years, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. In his presidential address, Dr Mahathir again, for the umpteenth time, appealed to Umno members and Malays to remember and uphold the party's original cause and principles and be just, fair, morally upright and incorruptible.

These are messages that Umno members should do well to heed because Umno's survival and the future course of the country depends on them adhering to the time-tested principles advocated by the president and deputy president.

The Straits Times of Singapore reporting on the assembly said:

"One line tucked away near the end of Abdullah Badawi's speech may have gone unnoticed. But it was a godsend for moderate Muslims and non-Malays. It was a policy statement on the future shape of Islam from the man who is slated to become the leader of Malaysia when Dr Mahathir Mohamad retires.

"Touching on Islam, he noted that a group of believers (read: Pas) were propagating an extreme form of the religion in the country, sowing seeds of hate along the way. He declared to robust applause: 'I am prepared to be at your forefront to do battle with this group.'"

The Straits Times further reported that the gains by Pas in the last election had made non-Muslims uneasy because they were concerned that Umno would take a more hardline Islamic stance to woo Muslim voters.

But both Dr Mahathir and Abdullah established clearly at the Umno assembly that this was not an option or course for Umno. Rather, the party

would adhere to its moderate path strictly.

There is nothing strange nor any deviation from the path of true Islamic teachings when both these leaders and Umno speak of Islam as Addeen, a way of life, and the party's perjuangan (struggle) as ibadah (a religious obligation).

In his winding-up address, Abdullah said Umno is a party of Muslims. What is a Muslim? Is he the western-media portrayed terrorist waging guerilla warfare? Is a Muslim one who cheats, lies, labels others as infidels (kafir) and advocates violence as a means to an end? Is he an extremist with a low tolerance level?

Certainly not, by Dr Mahathir's or Abdullah's definition. Certainly not by universal definition.

A good Muslim's values are reflected in his character. A good Muslim is one who is devoted, incorruptible, of good morals, attuned to the sufferings of the needy, peace-loving, caring, honest and sincere.

Umno and its leadership have never rejected Islam. In fact, almost in every speech Umno delegates have that inadvertent phrase: Untuk agama, bangsa dan negara (for religion, race and country). But the message to Umno members is also very clear.

Dr Mahathir touched raw nerves when he told Umno members to accept the reality that they were in a hostile society and that they could not turn to the Government to help them solve their political problems. One important aspect that the Prime Minister touched on was the need for Umno members to go to mosques, join mosque committees and through that, dictate the activities which would steer Muslims toward a moderate path. Otherwise, he warned, Pas would continue using the mosques to propagate its brand of extremism and not only would this split the Muslim community, it would do untold harm to the multi-ethnic, multi-religious harmony the country enjoys.

And when Abdullah defined Umno as a party of Muslims, he underlined the values that Umno members, as Muslims, should uphold to ensure the party's survival - devotion to Islam, morality, incorruptibility, honesty.

There may have been those within Umno who were uneasy and uncomfortable with the message conveyed by Dr Mahathir and Abdullah. Maybe because they did not fit the bill. But judging from Pas' reaction in the Harakah, its leaders too are uncomfortable because a party of Muslims, which adheres to the values advocated by the true teachings of Islam, will threaten the survival of Pas.

As a Malaysian and a Muslim, it is my prayer and hope that Umno members and leaders heed the message conveyed by Dr Mahathir and Abdullah. Otherwise, I, too, fear for the survival of our nation as we know it.