

16/03/2000

Heroes and villains in Malay politics

Shamsul Akmar

BY THE late 1970s, two decades after Malaysia had gained its independence, its primary school children were still being taught that the early Malay nationalists were villains and the colonial masters the heroes.

It was quite easy for the impressionable young minds to believe that the likes of Hugh Clifford, Frank Swettenham, J.W. Birch and Hugh Low, to name a few, were the personalities to look up to.

Clifford, for example, was portrayed as the hero who managed to quell the rebellion led by such Pahang Malay aristocrats as Datuk Bahaman, Tok Gajah and also Mat Kilau.

Similarly in the case of Birch, who was murdered by Maharaja Lela and Datuk Sagor. Birch was portrayed as a victim for attempting to put a stop to the adat hamba hutang (a local tradition where a debtor becomes the slave to the creditor) and the right to collect taxes which, prior to the British resident system, was under the purview of local chieftains like Maharaja Lela and Datuk Sagor.

It took years, until the early 1980s, before efforts were undertaken to review the old history syllabus as well to put things in the right perspective. With that, the Malays discovered new heroes, of whom there was a dearth in the community.

But these were heroes of the past. The Malays needed heroes whom they could relate to and turn into role models.

The fight for independence and efforts to uplift the standing of the community which suffered from the British divide-and-rule system gave birth to potential icons.

To a very large extent, Umno became the supplier of these when it took on the role as the community's main political entity involved in giving birth to Malay nationalism.

During the fight against the Malayan Union which sparked the emotions for independence, Umno churned out heroes by the dozens.

Of course, there were heroes from other political parties but Umno definitely was in the forefront in producing them.

The party continued with this role, hence, until now, whenever there is a crisis in the country, Umno is expected to provide leaders to overcome the nation's problems.

That is the reason why there has always been much attention when uncertainties or problems arise concerning the Umno leadership and the processes involved.

The ongoing Umno divisional meetings, a precursor to the election for Umno top leaders in May, is no different.

It is conducted amid much scepticism pertaining to Umno's relevance to the Malay struggle, the qualities of leaders available as well as the party's direction in the future.

This scepticism has come about due to the not so impressive results produced by Umno during last year's general election.

Apart from that, before the general election was held, Umno and the existing leadership was caught in a vitriolic battle with numerous segments of the Malay community following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

In his own right, Anwar, apart from endearing himself to these segments of the Malay community, had also managed to become an idol to their cause, whatever this may be.

It was during this bitter battle that the Malays were made to choose among the leaders whom they had accepted as heroes prior to the incident.

What unfurled was probably one of the most vicious battles within the Malay community in which the political divide led to things being perceived in black and white.

It was simply a case in which if one were a supporter of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, everything about Anwar was bad and vice-versa.

It reached a ridiculous level where those associated with either of the leaders were being dismissed as useless.

Many Malay heroes and potential ones suffered.

Datuk Azhar Mansor, who sailed solo around the world, was not accepted as a hero by some Malays just because upon his arrival in Langkawi, he embraced Dr Mahathir.

Similarly, songbird Siti Nurhaliza was almost boycotted by one side of the political divide when she made remarks which reflected the thoughts of Dr Mahathir.

Now, in the run-up to the Umno election, the focus on the personalities involved is, as expected, intense.

When the Umno supreme council made the no-contest decision, rumblings of dissatisfaction reverberated across the country, saying the move was undemocratic.

To the critics, including former supporters of Anwar, a no-contest means Dr Mahathir will be succeeded by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a leader who is expected to continue with Dr Mahathir's legacy.

With that, the name of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the man who almost defeated Dr Mahathir in the Umno election in 1987, cropped up.

To them, anyone, Tengku Razaleigh included, is better than having Abdullah as the potential successor.

This has contributed to the changing face of who can be deemed a Malay hero.

If in those days one became a Malay hero by leading Umno, nowadays, with the advent of the burgeoning middle-class, becoming a political leader subjects one to being seen as corrupt, unIslamic and untrustworthy.

The stigma, mostly perceived, has also come to the fore because of some black sheep in the Malay community.

At the same time, Pas' overdrive in pushing forth leaders with religious credentials has made moral integrity a requirement for one to be a Malay hero.

In short, a leader can be a visionary, achievement-oriented and successful but moral defects, to be read here as lacking in religious commitment, automatically disqualifies him from being a Malay hero.

This is already happening in Kelantan, though not too obviously.

In the past, Tok Janggut was the ultimate freedom fighter. Now, it is the saintly Tok Kenali because of his contributions to spreading the teachings of Islam and to spurring the growth of the pondok (Islamic religious school) system.

It is not surprising then that Tok Janggut, with his lesser Islamic credentials and a hobby like cock-fighting, is being replaced as a hero in religious Kelantan.

And this is spreading all over the country, a factor which those vying for posts in the Umno election should be aware of.

In short, winning Umno posts will not automatically make them a hero. More likely than not, efforts to paint the victors as villains are in store.

Unless of course, the Malay psyche changes or Umno does.

(END)