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Mass participation the key to revival of Umno

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AT the rate things are going, it is probably time Umno considers changing the term cawangan (branches), its lowest level of organisational hierarchy, to akar (roots).

In many ways, the term "branches" is a misnomer to the functionaries of this level of the party.

In fact, due to the misnomer, the branches have acted true to the moniker and this had contributed further to the elitism of Umno.

Said an avid observer of Umno politics:

"The party is indeed like a tree, expected to provide for those who had grown it and nurtured it.

"In the case of Umno, it was planted and nurtured by the Malays.

"Any tree without strong and healthy roots will sooner or later collapse."

Sounding philosophical but simplified, it means that Umno needs to strengthen its grassroots if it wants to remain relevant.

Writing to Utusan Malaysia on Thursday, an Umno member from Sungai Siput, Suhaimi Saidin, revealed how difficult it is to be a party member especially if one were considered a threat to the leadership at the branch and divisional levels.

"Generally, an application to be a member will be submitted to the branch which in turn will forward it to the division.

"It is at this (branch) stage when applications are blocked."

This is where the root of the problem lies.

The branches, instead of being the conduit to channel grassroots support to the party, decide to act like a top level arbiter.

In short, the branches are acting true to their name - positioned at the top of the tree and looking down on the roots.

When the branches themselves decide to assume the hatchet job and this is carried further by some divisions and the supreme council, what else can the party be other than ending up being elitist.

The problem of cantas-mencantas (blocking and removal of members) had been brought up and discussed at the supreme council.

Last week, party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had urged those who have difficulties joining the party at the grassroots level to submit their applications direct to headquarters.

How much this move will be effective is one thing but the damage done by this practice is something which has made Umno's mass appeal somewhat lacklustre.

Former Deputy Transport Minister Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad concurred, saying that the party is a mass movement which relies on mass support and remains relevant if it has mass appeal.

He pointed out two aspects that made Umno look less of a mass movement.

"First is the difficulty to join the party. Secondly, due to so many rules and conditions imposed, especially in its election process, most members feel they are left out.

"To my mind, what Umno should do is to open up the party and allow as many people to join it and the only requirement is for them to pay the token membership fee.

"Then, allow them to feel that being members they have the right to participate directly in the voting process of the party leadership, something akin to the presidential election in the United States."

Umno Lembah Pantai division member Nik Ahmad Azmi Nik Daud, who shares similar views, believes restrictions in campaigning and candidacy had led to unhealthy practices in the party.

"Prohibiting campaigning has led to members conspiring within closed doors thus creating a clique system within the party," he said.

"The requirement that candidates will only be eligible to contest after securing a certain number of nominations has given rise to abuse. There have been accusations by certain quarters that their nominations were blocked."

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was one of those affected during the run-up to the party elections in May. He was then struggling to secure enough nominations when he spoke up.

Ironically, he is today heading the Umno committee studying amendments to the party constitution and other rules, including the requirement for nominations.

Someone quipped that it is apt to have Muhyiddin heading the committee as he should know what's best as he had gone through it and almost ended up being put out to pasture.

On his part, Muhyiddin has promised that the exercise of compiling proposals on amending the constitution will be a process of "from top to bottom and from the bottom to top".

"If he can manage that, then it is not the amendments that will strengthen the party. Rather, it is the process of allowing the grassroots to give their feedback and views to the top leadership that is comforting," said an Umno member from Shah Alam.

No doubt, all the debates and ideas being bounced around seems to be making Umno a more democratic party with wider mass participation.

Yet there is another lingering matter about Umno, the one that concerns a perception that it is a party that discourages open criticisms from members.

In fact, the perception that exists among the general public is that party members of all levels are expected to quietly accept any decisions made by the Supreme Council.

"There seems to be paranoia among certain leaders in situations when some members decide to question or disagree with decisions made by the Supreme Council.

"Sometimes it is not so much the leadership. In many instances, it is the hangers-on who attempt to poison the minds of the leadership.

"Otherwise, they are labelled as being supporters of sacked (Deputy President Datuk Seri) Anwar Ibrahim," said a party insider.

Ibrahim who used to be closely associated with Anwar had this to say:

"It is quite true that such a perception prevails. Everytime someone like me or others, who were quite close to Anwar before, open our mouth, certain quarters are quick to attack us and accuse us of trying to further Anwar's agenda or conspiring to bring about the downfall of the present leadership.

"To my mind, the fact that we chose to remain in Umno proves that we are loyal to the party and if there are any criticisms made against certain policies or programmes, it is definitely giving an opinion to either improve the policy or what we think is best for Umno."

Such paranoia is not a new phenomenon in Umno. A similar occurrence prevailed after the contest between Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah for the presidency in 1987.

While Tengku Razaleigh went on to set up Semangat 46, some of his supporters chose to remain in Umno. And every time they criticised certain moves by the top leadership, there would be some quarters who would accuse them of attempting to pursue Tengku Razaleigh's interests.

Of course, it would be naive to believe that there are no such attempts but surely, the party leadership would be able to judge the merit of the criticisms, and not who made them or to whom they are or were aligned to.

When such forces attempt to muzzle those who were associated with certain leaders who are out of the party, these members end up going to the opposition.

"It is not so much that these members want to join the opposition but they merely want a platform to be able to air their criticisms against the party," said a party insider.

"Even right now, the criticisms of some former Umno members who are in the opposition touch on the way the party is being run and not on its policies or programmes.

"To my mind, why should these former members care about how Umno is being managed as they had joined another party. They should be concerned about the new party they had joined."

It makes sense. After all, being able to express views and make criticisms are another form of mass participation.

But there is this positive thought at the back of the mind if one were to assess these views forwarded by all these Umno members.

The fact that they are clear about what they want and how they want things done in the party are reflections that Umno had not been that unsuccessful.

In their own right, these members are its creation and the fact that they want to share their views about the party should provide some comfort to the leadership.

After all, the leaders too, at one time, were part of the grassroots.

Yes, the roots that ensure the top does not crumble.

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