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Outsiders clueless about Umno

THIS promises to be a great year for political analysts. Already many are gleefully assailing a suggestion by the Umno supreme council that its top two posts not be contested.

The frenzy has all been rather baffling, though. To begin with, one cannot decide whether the analysts wish to see Umno wilt or blossom in the political heat.

Critics run the whole gamut in the flourishing industry of political commentary. It lends further credence (or legitimacy, which seems to be the flavour of the week) to the often disputed fact that Malaysia is a fully-fledged democracy.

As everyone rushes in, the lines which have faithfully demarcated the political divide in the past have blurred. It will not stop those on the Government's side in the political divide from thinking that their criticism is rich in wisdom and laced with imaginative and constructive suggestions. They may also contend, with some justification, that others merely provide sardonic and sweeping assessments.

"Umno is refusing to learn any lessons from the election," an unnamed Western diplomat (the most-sought after commentator from time immemorial anywhere in the world, because he or she can be anyone, from an Ambassador, to a security guard to your sprightly drinking kaki), told Reuters.

A common factor is present in most of the negative analyses. The stream of advice for Umno is unfailingly adorned in superlatives - "Umno must change drastically!", "Umno must carry out comprehensive reforms!", "Umno must do a major this and a substantial that!" Or take in more professionals and the young without saying how.

Since one is not obliged to think through the recommendations carefully, given that it is someone else's problem or situation, specific suggestions have been non-existent or at best scarce.

From a grim standpoint, therefore, the "advice glut" is quite honestly, desultory and even senseless.

Strictly for the sake of witticism, however, all these can be funny, uproariously so at times. How often would you have life-long critics offering counter-proposals (quite clearly unsolicited) to Umno?

A dogged critic, M.G.G. Pillai has suggested that Umno "brutally re-position itself back into the Malay cultural heartland".

Pillai may, to some, be a doyen in the Malaysian political commentary industry, but pray tell, sir, how does one "brutally re-position itself?"

Reuters also spoke to James Wong (cited as a former opposition member of Parliament and columnist for the Sin Chew Jit Poh) and Wong apparently said that: "Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the party are still resistant to structural reform in Umno and refuse to recognise their mistakes".

It proves this point - terms like "refusal", "mistakes" and "denial syndrome" are now entrenched as popular jargon in political punditry, replacing the likes of "cronyism" and "nepotism".

Who one talks to for comments naturally matters. Anyone remotely connected to journalism knows that the reply from someone unabashedly critical of Umno to a decision made within Umno is likely to be frightfully nonsensical.

That did not stop an Internet newspaper from soliciting the advice of Dr

P. Ramasamy of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia who duly said that "the people don't want Dr Mahathir anymore and if Umno doesn't read that message, the party will continue to weaken".

On a brighter note, the same Internet newspaper carried an article with a quotation said to be from a think-tank head who said the no-contest suggestion is a "strategic move to retain the support of the Malays and Abdullah (Badawi) is the right man to do it".

It goes to show that while this post-election period merrily threatens to denigrate into a party for Umno bashers, objectivity has not been drowned. The backdrop is this - not every commentator has made up his mind that Umno is less democratic than anyone else and that Umno is in dire need of an urgent, thorough reform.

A quick lesson in recent history may help reduce the "credibility gap" in political analyses. This is intertwined with the poser of whether there is a correlation between intra-party contests and their performance in the Nov 29 election. Have Datuk Fadzil Noor and Abdul Hadi Awang ever been challenged? Pas has an unwritten rule that severely punishes any leader who projects himself as a contender in the run-up to the party elections. How does this compare with the non-binding suggestion by the Umno supreme council?

MCA, for its part, achieved a certain feat in its latest elections when there was no contest at all for the central committee seats. Such awesome unanimity takes some beating. Will it help democracy flourish? Did it affect MCA's performance at the polls? And when will Parti Keadilan Nasional hold its elections? Will the entire list of office-bearers be pre-determined by a certain middle-aged man in Sungai Buloh?

It has been argued that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi needs the political legitimacy (that word again) of going through a contest like his predecessors.

Recent memory suggests that Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim never did see a contest against him. He forced out Tun Ghafar Baba in 1993 and was never challenged thereafter.

The discerning reader would have also noticed the ambivalence in some commentaries on the no-contest suggestion. The writings may start menacingly, suggesting that they are ready to gobble Umno alive, and yet they end meekly. The reasons for this and for the flaws in other analyses will be provided later.

In the meantime, let's see how the train of thought in some assessments lacks cohesion. Consider this one by Ronnie Liu, DAP national publicity secretary and DAP Selangor chairman: "The no-contest decision (it is actually a suggestion!) may be able to suppress calls for reform in the party, and subsequently may delay the split in Umno for a few years, but it would certainly leave a bigger battle-ground for massive in-fighting within the party in the coming years."

Our apologies for making our esteemed readers suffer that convoluted sentence. It masked the fervent hope of Liu to see Umno enduring another acrimonious contest at the top.

DAP is quite clearly and understandably in favour of a fractious contest at the May 11 Umno elections. Lim Kit Siang in fact called for a no-holds-barred contest for the No. 2 in Umno, so Abdullah "could seal his political legitimacy".

A healthy infusion of objectivity is sorely needed in this debate.

One, the views of commentators and tormentors are respected. They can say their piece but accepting their arguments is something else.

Two, Umno knows best the situation it is in. While others can worry or pretend to be concerned about the so-called Umno problem, they should be democratic enough to let Umno handle its own affairs. We will surely be

kept informed. Umno is, in any case, the most transparent political party in Malaysia with the media almost always getting wind of intimate details of proceedings at the highest levels. And these details demolish claims that the leadership imposes its will.

Three, the assessment that Umno has not learned from its mistakes was triggered by some jaundiced reasoning and was done without intelligently addressing the reason for the drop in Umno vote.

It is widely accepted that the Anwar factor had loomed large in the elections while at least three States in the Malay belt had blamed returning KL voters for their dismay.

The Anwar factor is not even political. It is about emotions and doses of melancholy. The same commentators who accepted this factor as one of the determinants in the elections are calling for "sweeping reforms" in Umno. Are they suggesting that if Anwar had not been sacked, Umno would not require reforms?

When Anwar and his campaign managers manipulated the nomination process for the deputy presidency in 1993, shouldn't it too have precipitated calls for reforms? Or if Umno had fielded the right candidates, as some thought was a reason for the performance, would there be any need for change?

Fourth, Abdullah, the unwitting target of scorn following the no-contest suggestion, has made it clear he is willing to go through a contest.

And fifth, one by one, Umno divisions will hold their delegates meetings and individual delegates are free to propose names. Like the supreme council members, they are the insiders who will determine the destiny of the party.

Sixth, it is fashionable to call for the infusion of the young and the professional into Umno leadership. It is admittedly a good cause. Can it be executed? Those looking from outside can at best provide piecemeal suggestions. Should these young professionals offer themselves as candidates at the divisions and risk bitter fights and splits? Or are we suggesting there is not already a sizeable representation of the young and the professional in the party?

Or should Umno sever the link between party posts and an almost guaranteed candidacy at the elections? Exactly what the criteria are for the much-sought-after young professionals is unknown. Only Umno can see the big picture of what is essentially its internal affairs.

Finally, are we absolutely sure the soul-searching has not begun within Umno and, for strategic purposes, is being kept under a tight lid?

Like any other industry, political analyses is flourishing. But Malaysians should be keenly aware of the political thinking of particular commentators and retain the democratic right to make their own assessment.

Looking back, has the no-contest suggestion met with a gross over-reaction?

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