

16/03/2000

Party elections bring to the fore the need to look at the bigger picture

Shamsul Akmar

AMID the intense political atmosphere shrouding the Umno divisional meetings, Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Wira Mohd Ali Rustam seems to be more focused than many.

Instead of merely putting in efforts to secure positions in the party like the rest of the pack, Mohd Ali is into the bigger picture - dealing with matters which concern the party and not individuals.

Look at his decision to withdraw State funds amounting to RM40 million from two banks purportedly staffed by supporters or sympathisers of the opposition.

The move, no doubt, is aimed at "punishing" those who earn their keep from the Government yet have no qualms about biting the hand that feeds them.

On one hand, it can be said that the banks and their employees deserve it especially when they are supposed to be professional in carrying out their tasks and should confine their anti-government activities during their free time.

On the other hand, such "punishments", especially when they involve Bumiputera or Malay entities and individuals can also be a setback to the continuing efforts by the Government to improve their lot.

Here, the question of a "bigger, bigger picture" is at stake.

Probably Mohd Ali should take the cue from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when dealing with such a situation.

A corporate figure, who attended a breaking of fast function hosted by Dr Mahathir, related how the Umno president reacted when a guest complained to him that some politicians who contested under the opposition banner were recipients of government contracts.

He said Dr Mahathir in responding, smiled and said:

"They are Malays too, aren't they?"

The point is that as much as some Umno supporters might be upset with the fact that those who had benefited from the government's generosity were among those working against the government, being magnanimous should be of equal importance.

After all, that is what Umno's original struggle is all about - to improve the economic standing of the Malays.

The party believes this is the formula to stability in this multi-racial country.

However, Mohd Ali should be forgiven for not looking at the much bigger picture.

There are many other Umno leaders vying for party positions in the May party elections who are also ignoring the bigger picture.

So intense is their interest in securing a position that they are prepared to go to extremes to undermine their opponents.

While many Umno members may find American politics not their cup of tea, the recent election in the United States for presidential candidates in the Republican and Democratic parties could be a good reminder of what their focus should be.

The Democrats seem to have settled their problems when Al Gore was chosen and Bill Bradley, gave a gentleman's support to Mr Gore to ensure that the presidency remains within their party.

However, in the case of the Republicans, though George W. Bush is the candidate, the bitter battle with John McCain is expected to affect the

party's hope of returning to the White House.

As pointed out by most political observers in the United States, Bush may lose some of the Republican supporters who might have given strong backing to McCain.

This is especially true when both Bush and McCain had exchanged bitter words and mounted personal attacks which had partly damaged their reputations.

Umno candidates vying for party posts can take a leaf from the American primaries.

Winning posts in the party leadership may pave the way to mainstream politics but surely it should not be at the expense of weakening the party.

This is especially when it has, after the last general election, remained as the main political vehicle for the Malays.

If these candidates adopt a winner-takes-all attitude, they risk the possibility of alienating some members and leaders who may feel unfairly treated during this season of party elections.

Now that the initial excitement over the position of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in the run-up to the May election is somewhat slowing down, the case of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin is in the limelight.

He claims there are attempts to prevent him and Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar from being nominated for a vice-president's post.

If his allegations are true, then Umno should keep vigil to put a stop to it.

No one should dismiss Muhyiddin's allegation, at least not just yet nor should it be accepted until he proves it.

But given the past activities in the run-up to Umno party election, the accusation by Muhyiddin may not so far-fetched.

If one were to reflect on the run-up to the 1993 party election, the year the Team Wawasan stormed the assembly when most of its members secured the posts they were vying for, Muhyiddin's case today holds water. The 1993 party election saw the then deputy president Tun Ghafar Baba unceremoniously removed by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim even before the election started.

Then, every candidate getting nominations from divisions for the president or deputy president's posts would earn 10 bonus votes. But of greater interest then was how Team Wawasan managed to ensure that most of the divisions carried out block voting so much so that any attempt by delegates in a division to nominate someone outside the team list would be rejected.

There were numerous complaints then about how divisions and delegates were told by State Umno heads that they must nominate according to the list provided by Team Wawasan.

Some division heads who tried to nominate candidates other than those in the Team Wawasan were known to have been called up by certain leaders in the team to make them change their mind.

As such, the allegation by Muhyiddin is not something far-fetched nor is it a new phenomenon in Umno election.

After all, Muhyiddin was a member of Team Wawasan.

(END)