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Resurrection

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IT took all of four days for Jesus to revive Lazarus from the dead. In that space of time (May 10-13), Umno delegates gathered for their 54th general assembly in Kuala Lumpur showed they could conjure up near-miraculous feats too. They blew life back into a number of stunted political careers thought to have been consigned to the dustbin of history. Some credit delegates with single-minded independence while others blamed it on the insidious effects of money politics.

Whatever the catalyst, the results of the contest for positions within Umno have raised eyebrows. In the process, some ghosts of the past were resurrected. The winning vice-presidency line-up of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin raised the spectre of a spiritual revival of the so-called 'Wawasan' team. Those with short memories need to hark back to the 1993 general assembly when the trio and the then Malacca Chief Minister Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik, together with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, formed a pact and swept all before them. If delegates had doubts whether the three vice-presidents could still harbour lingering allegiance to Anwar, then it certainly did not colour their judgement. That the delegates voted them in reinforces the belief that politics is the art of the possible.

The 'Anwar' connection notwithstanding, who would have thought it possible for Muhammad, after three years in the wilderness, to still be able to command a loyal following? Few gave the former Selangor Menteri Besar much hope of making a political comeback, considering his travails in the Australian and Malaysian courts. But not only has his star regained its lustre, it is positively glowing. He landed the plum position of one of the three Umno vice-presidents, securing 853 votes.

How did he do it? Firstly, there is his personal charm and charisma. Women are known to go weak in the knees in his presence while men see in Muhammad physical attributes they'd liked for themselves. Suffice it to say that he earned the nickname 'Mike Tyson' not for any pugilistic prowess but more for a perceived shared virility. Then there's ability. His stewardship of the office of Menteri Besar was a hard act to follow. Compared to his successor, some say, Muhammad is Action Man personified.

His campaigning dexterity is also worthy of scrutiny. Immediately after all the candidates gave the Prime Minister an undertaking not to resort to 'money politics' in the run-up to the general assembly, a huge banner appeared outside his house in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Kuala Lumpur. It declared grandly his support for the PM's call, along with a few other nationalistic chants. The press lapped it up. Cynics said they fell for it hook, line and sinker - there in the next day's newspapers were pictures of Muhammad's rousing deed!

The other 'Lazarus' in the vice-presidency race was Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. The Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister and former Johor Menteri Besar himself despaired at the apparent mountain he had to climb early in the race. Holding a federal Cabinet position and having to concentrate on national matters meant that he lost the intimacy which he said was needed to retain the loyalty of delegates from his home State. He went so far as to suggest that there were attempts to block Johor Umno divisions from nominating him.

The unidentified bogey was clearly the State party leadership under Menteri Besar Abdul Ghani Osman who, as Johor Umno liaison head, had free

run of the State to coax, cajole and press the flesh. With the benefit of hindsight, it was an astute move on Muhyiddin's part to have aired his fears publicly and bring them to the attention of the Prime Minister. There must have been plenty of delegates from outside Johor who sympathised with him and contributed towards the 813 votes which went Muhyiddin's way.

The lesson to be drawn? Publicity is important: get noticed and you'll stick in the minds of delegates. It does appear that with out-and-out campaigning prohibited - aspirants were not even allowed to distribute flyers - the slightest public twitch from contestants got magnified and worked eventually in their favour.

If Muhyiddin felt aggrieved by the `blocking manoeuvres' during the hustings, what of Zahid Hamidi? He came in for special `dishonourable' mention in the President's speech. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's observation that Zahid was used by Anwar as a tool to conspire against him could easily have been taken as a signal of rejection. But if this was the intention, then the 11th-hour appeal did not work: Zahid secured 1,370 votes, placing him fourth in the list of winners for the 25 Supreme Council seats.

What of the `forgotten man' Datuk Shahrir Samad? He came 14th in the race for a Supreme Council seat, with 1,030 votes. The former Welfare Minister, acknowledged as nobody's `yes man', quietly, almost surreptitiously eased himself back into the reckoning. His winning of a Supreme Council seat reflects the new Umno Zeitgeist: Umno can now look at the input of `sentries' and `gatekeepers' who have a new-found reforming zeal. By their words at the assembly, they appear ready to yield in deference to authority but when the need arises, they are ready to defy it.

The race for the top two posts in the Wanita wing did not disappoint those who had expected a real cat fight. The contest itself was uneventful, but the razor-thin 12-vote victory secured by Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz over incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman has created ripples that are still being felt. The `unladylike' post-contest manoeuvres were curt and the repercussions, vicious. Certainly there was no love lost between the two feisty combatants. There was neither magnanimity offered in victory nor grace displayed in defeat. Despite the President's wholehearted support for her, Rafidah was not an entirely popular victor. Some members have expressed unease at the way the unflattering call for her to `zip up' was lightly, almost arrogantly, dismissed. She has three years to win over her detractors who find her demeanour grating.

Despite the double dose of booing directed at her from the floor - or precisely because of the jeering - Rafidah had no compunction in naming a new Wanita line-up with Siti Zaharah conspicuously absent. Dirty linen is also being washed in the open with claims that the movement under Siti Zaharah has left a trail of unpaid debts. Siti Zaharah may play the aggrieved party, but this should be *deja vu* if she cares to look back at events following her victory three years ago.

Observers believe this unedifying bickering was a contributing factor in the Wanita wing's failure to boast a single Supreme Council seat. Votes from female delegates were not directed to any Wanita candidate in any coordinated fashion. It is safe to say the men voted for their own, driven away no doubt by the spectacle of women feuding.

The main talking point about the race for Supreme Council seats was the abject failure of any serving Menteri Besar to secure victory. This was taken as a resounding rebuke by delegates who felt the Menteri Besar who double up as the party's State liaison heads have underperformed. The

Menteris Besar could also have miscalculated and paid the price for not putting up a single consensus candidate from among their ranks.

While the winners hosted majlis kesyukuran (thanksgiving prayers), the losers sulked and cast around for an explanation for their poor showing. Datuk Rais Yatim, for one, refused to believe that 'money politics' had been banished in this contest. If he had thought that his newly-acquired high profile and renewed enthusiasm for Umno were sufficient to earn him a vice-presidential post, then he knows better now.

Is there a new Umno, post-general assembly 2000? Delegates in the youth wing, for instance, were quite damning in their assessment of Umno's performance in the general election. They were unforgiving in heaping blame on the party leadership (though everyone stopped short of pinning blame on the President himself) for being out of touch with the sentiments of ordinary members.

Everyone was agreed that the Malays deserted the party on a huge scale. No one attributed this to the 'Anwar' factor; rather, they ascribed it to the failure of Umno to carry across its message effectively. Many blamed the preoccupation with personal enrichment among office bearers and party officials as the biggest 'turn off' which lost Umno much Malay support.

This new reality is reflected in Dr Mahathir's call at the end of the assembly for Umno members to put themselves in the opposition's shoes in the face of a hostile political scenario. He asked for greater effort and commitment from members to work towards the good of the party, as if power resided in the opposition. Dr Mahathir said Umno was paying the price for putting its fate in the hands of others. 'I appeal to all,' he said. 'Unite immediately and work as if there are no more government agencies and newspapers which support us.'

Observers saw this as Dr Mahathir's reaction to criticisms that the Umno leadership had lost touch with the grassroots. It also was taken as a cue that Dr Mahathir would be delegating many of his official duties to others, especially his deputy, to spend more time on party activities. Umno has shown that resurrection is achievable. It remains to be seen if four days of introspection, self-flagellation and soul-searching is enough for Umno to now go forth, multiply and prosper. That would be an achievement worthy of Lazarus.