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The Doctor's orders hard pill to swallow

Abdullah Ahmad

AS SOME 76 candidates - major and minor - vie, as expected not too unstrenuously, for the third echelon posts in the Umno elections on May 10 and 11, Umno's opponents continue doggedly to wish that it would sink like the Titanic. What a wishful thought.

The 54-year-old party is well and thriving, otherwise the 15 candidates for the posts of vice presidency, wanita chief, deputy wanita chief and deputy youth leader, and 61 candidates for 25 Supreme Council seats, would not have pledged, for the first time in Umno's history, that they would not "practise money politics, corrupt politics and corrupt practices". A promise easy to make but hard to keep.

The president of Umno, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was sincere and a realist when he acknowledged that it might not be possible to monitor all activities and everything. Though drug trafficking is a serious offence in Malaysia and Singapore, with a mandatory death sentence, many still take the risk. For sure, knowing the background of some of the candidates, they will violate their oaths as, a very senior Umno leader told me, they do with their other oaths.

Tan Sri Musa Hitam's speech in Johor Baru recently and Tengku Razaleigh's many statements confirm that democracy does exist in Umno even if it is not thriving. These two Umno "elder statesmen" are not heroes nor are they cowards for they do, from time to time when they feel it is appropriate, speak up. If some of the members cower in fear, then who is to be blamed? No risks, no gains.

The health of the BN Government and Umno is good. Indeed, it must be improving, for would six Parti Bersatu Sabah state assemblymen want to join a sinking government? They did so, it seems, without any condition or reward. The fact that the defectors did not join Umno but the BN component party, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah, does not in the least detract from the importance of their defection.

The opponents, in their unbridled hatred of the Government and the ruling party, have made Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim their icon and Al Gore and Joseph Estrada their foreign heroes. What made them wear blinkers? Are they attempting to deceive themselves as they always do? There is only one word to describe these people: dreamers - absolutely out of touch with what is happening on the ground.

Dr Mahathir has, at long last, even if it is too late, although better late than never, decided to tackle money politics, the cancer in Umno. His intervention should prick the conscience of the candidates and their signed pledge soothe him. That leaves the next move to the 76 men and women contesting the elections on May 10 and 11. As a result of Dr Mahathir's strong "advice", they may have cooled their campaigns, even tempered their rhetorics about money politics and corrupt practices.

Some continue to resort - and I am not altogether surprised - to subtle forms of bribery while others are cautious they do not make a mockery of Dr Mahathir's edict. Thus, some restraint on the part of the candidates and the delegates, of whom 600 are estimated to be in the federal capital daily in the run-up to the elections, is in order. Those caught will suffer a great deal of grief and more but the "professional bribers" will laugh their way to the polling booth. A minor candidate mockingly told me that "bribery is like adultery. The greatest sin is in being found out".

Agents of senior candidates, volunteers, runners and gift bearers have

the advantage of intimate knowledge of the 2004 delegates and their weaknesses. About who among these obscure delegates, made "bigger and more influential" than they actually are (largely by the elections), can resist money and what money can buy.

But the question is, will the problem of money politics go away just because it is being written about extensively?

There should be morality in politics but it is hard to find ethics as the demands of high office make adhering to ethical codes an increasingly arduous task. As the delegates' material values have replaced virtual ones, and what was wrong in my time is now merely "inappropriate", the opportunists see opportunities in any situation and gladly seize them.

Like in cockfighting stories, I am now reading that the candidates, from a rich variety of characters - ordinary as well as recognisable names - are all caught up in a desperate situation where everything is at stake. The losers will turn their ire on everyone, including their wives. The winners will undergo a sea change. I have seen it all too often. They will forget old friends and allies as they acquire new pals and forge new partnerships.

On the evening of May 11, I expect at least a provincial or state Umno chieftain to be catapulted into the national limelight, making him a probable deputy prime minister, even a potential premier. He will, if he is smart, alter the Malaysian political landscape within a decade. If he has read G.K. Chesterton, he will then recall this: Nothing succeeds like success.

This state chieftain conjures up an image of political correctness that can only serve him to win the support of all Malaysians.

George Washington stated that of all the practices that lead to national prosperity, morality is an indispensable guide. Dr Mahathir has, over the years, been stressing the importance of the Malaysian soul imbibing nationalism, religion, moral discipline and education to ensure stability, sustainable development and a prosperous and peaceful Malaysia. If Umno members and leaders absorb all this, the party will continue to dominate and lead the nation for a long time to come.

Always, morality is the beacon for those in politics and public service. Morals shape leadership.

While political life offers its own rewards, for post-May 11 Umno, a major part of my pleasure will be to note how public perceptions have changed.

Umno is the nation's political centrepiece and part of an overall striving for good governance, greater transparency, equitable distribution of wealth, power and capabilities.

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