

13/03/2000

The making of Hishammuddin

Abdullah Ahmad

THE excitement of the early struggle for independence by Umno captured my imagination. My appetite for politics was already considerable when I began reporting on Umno, Pas, Party Negara (now defunct), Party Rakyat and Labour Party (also defunct) and occasionally MCA and MIC for the Straits Times (now New Straits Times) in the spring of 1957, at age 19 plus.

Many men were responsible for whetting my interest and involvement in journalism and politics - Leslie Hoffman, Samad Ismail, Lee Siew Yee, Harry Miller and Felix Abisheganaden among them.

However, the man solely responsible for giving me the opportunity to practise and administer politics was the benign and efficient Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, the supreme Malay meritocrat, who spotted and developed latent talents in politics, civil service and private sector, and empowered them.

Razak was himself state secretary of Pahang at 28, minister of education at 33, deputy prime minister at 35 and prime minister at 48. It was three months before his 54th birthday when he died in 1976.

Though serving as Malaysia's special envoy to the United Nations since 1996, politics, Umno politics especially, has never deserted me. Indeed, it suddenly became alive again (despite having left Parliament in 1990 and active politics in late-1995) when I started writing weekly columns in The Sun (ceased after more than three years), Utusan Malaysia every Monday and this newspaper also every Monday. I write columns and special articles in my spare time, normally before going to bed.

Journalism proved a good practice and background when I was invited to join Tunku Abdul Rahman's administration in October 1963 and since the spring of 1996 as an ambassador.

In writing this article on Pemuda Umno or Umno Youth, I am well aware that it cannot possibly match the great interest generated by the leadership contest, on which I shall pen in due course; the big fight for the three vice presidential positions, the vice heirs to the heir of the Umno leadership.

And it will be an even bigger story if Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad or Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is challenged by either Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah or a stalking horse.

Today's story is therefore a non-event by comparison. In fact, it could not and did not kindle my interest as much as it might.

Still, Pemuda Umno is one of the two important estates of the Umno realm and once upon a time the movement exerted a formidable and continuous influence in the party and government. Pemuda Umno (of which I was never a part) is, I believe, in the process of reappraising itself in the wake of what happened in the past two years, the Anwar Ibrahim saga and the last general elections.

It has to reinvent itself to recapture the political imagination and expectations of the Malay and Bumiputera youth. But Umno Youth is still relevant, and worth supporting.

On Friday, May 10, Pemuda delegates, I expect, will choose by acclamation their 12th leader, Datuk Hishammuddin (39 years old), a grandson of Datuk Onn Jaafar, the founding president of Umno.

Two of Hishammuddin's predecessors - Tun Razak and Tun Hussein (Hishammuddin's father) became prime ministers. Razak succeeded Hussein as Umno Youth leader in 1951 and Hussein in turn followed Razak as prime

minister on January 14 1976.

The Razak and Hussein families - related through marriages - have produced four out of 12 Umno Youth leaders to date (Hussein, Razak, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Hishammuddin), and three party presidents out of five (Onn, Razak and Hussein, the other two being Tunku Abdul Rahman and Dr Mahathir).

The question is whether Najib and Hishammuddin will follow their distinguished fathers' footsteps. Umno is still, despite its recent electoral reverses and dogged political problems, the most powerful political machine in the nation. And it remains the only redeeming party for Bumiputeras and indeed for Malaysia.

Umno faces a formidable challenge, from Pas in particular, and attracting the increasingly politically sophisticated young Malay-Bumiputera professionals and intellectuals to join or support it is, in the main, the major task of Pemuda under Hishammuddin.

What he does, the values he espouses and the image he portrays, will to a large extent, determine the level of participation in Umno by the burgeoning Malay and Bumiputera "yuppies", middle class professionals and students.

The young Malays and Bumiputeras are looking for "something attractive and alluring", an "ism" for lack of a better expression - to rekindle their interest and attachment to the party that had made who and what they are today. For sure, they will expect greater openness, accountability and participation in the movement and government. They look for a genuine quality administration, which is not to say the present government is not.

It seemed to me before, and still do, that there are vast areas which must be upgraded to meet the mounting challenge posed by the growing political awareness, as well as the fast approaching and encroaching globalisation process and its ramifications.

Unless all these issues are addressed by Hishammuddin - cleverly and convincingly - Umno Youth cannot and must not expect to continue to be the political torch bearer it once was under Sardon Jubir, later Tun, and governor of Penang.

It was the combustible, ultra nationalist and sometimes comical Sardon who demanded and got the Tunku to fix the deadline for Malayan independence on August 31 1957.

Umno was formed as a mass movement and remains so. It began its life believing that everything was achievable and it did attain a lot, a fact nobody denies. The party's history is illustrious, but it cannot and must not rest on past laurels. It is crucial that it delivers what the young people of Malaysia expect of it during the first decade of the new millennium, and this must be much more than what Pas presumes it can do.

Whether Umno likes it or not, new and newer issues and Pas require that the party be reinvigorated, even reformed. Hishammuddin has a daunting task, indeed an unenviable one, of restoring Pemuda's past glory. An acceptable dynamic policy change will go some way towards making amends for Umno's recent setback.

A top Malay intellectual said to me over lunch at his modest house in Bangsar recently: "I'm amazed why many Umno members appear to be dispirited with the BN (Barisan Nasional)'s performance in the last general elections when in comparative politics terms, BN did brilliantly.

"Taking into consideration the massive urbanisation, industrialisation, de-feudalisation, de-authoritarianisation and modernisation of the Malaysian society, especially the Malays, Umno fared very well despite being in power for more than 42 years.

"Practically no political party - perhaps no political party in the modern democratic history of a sizeable state - has remained in power for

so long and yet stayed in such good shape. However, it is time to get back to the basics, to the roots. Umno shall not become Indian Congress Party."

Razak started the New Economic Policy. Dr Mahathir enlarged and vigorously implemented it until the Asian economic and financial crisis hit us in the middle of 1997. Perhaps, the time has come to think of a complete change in policy, even the political process and system itself.

While the Government may not be obsolete, its system of doing things definitely is. We have to assess and re-examine recent experiences. Can the Umno-BN empowerment be sustained? I believe it can.

Despite the worst trauma in its history, the grand old party continues to hold power. In a way, this is a remarkable tribute to Umno's continued resilience and relevance.

It managed and manages to overcome, though bruised, combined national and international opposition to win a two-thirds majority in Parliament. The big question in 2005 is whether Hishammuddin and Pemuda will be of much help to Umno if the party were to find itself in circumstances similar to those in 1999.

Whatever I may write about Hishammuddin now and later cannot alter his attributes or how he is perceived by others, nor will it increase or lessen his dynamism or otherwise. Only Hishammuddin himself can do that.

As of now, only time will tell whether a resurgent Pemuda Umno and indeed Umno itself will emerge.

* The writer is Malaysia's special envoy to the United Nations.

(END)