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The risks of 'unbridled democracy'

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SINCE the Umno supreme council advised party divisions that there should be no contest for the posts of president and deputy president, there have been numerous reactions in the media. Over the last weekend, there were also a spate of analyses in your newspaper expressing varied views.

As a member of Umno, I have a different perspective from journalists.

First, I am aggrieved that one of your writers accused the supreme council of "dereliction of duties" and "looking after its own interests" when making the no-contest decision.

The writer also said that the supreme council had "suspended democracy" in the party. I also found it disconcerting another writer implied that the members of the supreme council were duped into agreeing to the decision by the top leadership.

It was also suggested that while Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would easily win if challenged, he needed to get endorsement to legitimise and make honourable his ascendancy to the Umno deputy presidency.

The general election results jolted many of us, especially the strong performance of Pas in Pahang and Kedah and its victory in Terengganu.

There have been many analyses and post-mortems on why we did not perform well.

But generally, we are in agreement that some of the key factors against us were the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim case, the way some sections of the Malay community believed in the lies spread by the Opposition, in particular Pas and the DAP, and internal bickering and wrong choice of candidates in certain States.

There is a case for Umno to review its strategies and to respond to calls for change in certain areas. That aside, one key element which contributed substantially to our poor showing was dissension within the ranks. Thankfully, this was not enough to cause Umno to lose its dominance in Malaysian politics.

One of the key reasons for discord, I believe, is the frequency of party elections and campaigns for top posts. Every two years, 2.7 million members are involved in branch elections. Every third year, they campaign for divisional elections. And every third year, there is an intense contest for the supreme council posts.

We perpetually go from one party election to another. Therefore, there is no question of democracy being "suspended". Umno members are given the opportunity to make changes in leadership at all levels almost annually.

I challenge anyone to show us a political party in Malaysia, or for that matter, the region, which allows a greater exercise of democracy.

Umno has grown very fast in the last 12 years. When the party was declared unlawful in 1988, we had just over a million members. Now we have 2.7 million.

Even if all the one million members re-joined the party after it was re-registered, 63 per cent in the current list will still be new members, many of whom do not have the historical perspective of Umno's struggles. Sadly, some writers too, forget this perspective in their commentaries.

If we look at Umno's history, maybe we will understand the ingredients that made the party strong and why it was such a united force. For example, in 1972, when Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman passed away, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein appointed Tun Hussein Onn as Deputy Prime Minister. Hussein was later confirmed to the vacant deputy president's post by the party

assembly without contest though there were many others who felt qualified for the job.

When Razak died in 1976, Hussein became Prime Minister and was confirmed as president without contest. He appointed Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was the third vice-president, as Deputy Prime Minister and later, the general assembly confirmed Dr Mahathir as deputy president without a contest.

Tun Ghafar Baba, who was then the senior vice-president and secretary-general of the Barisan Nasional, was believed to be disappointed but did not challenge the party's decision.

In 1981, when Hussein retired, Dr Mahathir became Prime Minister and Umno president without a contest.

I offer as an historical analysis the following facts. What happened after Hussein became deputy president without contest in 1973? Razak formed the Barisan Nasional which won resoundingly in the 1974 general election in contrast to the Alliance's poor performance, in particular Umno, in the preceding May 1969 election.

In 1978, when Dr Mahathir was Deputy Prime Minister, Umno won Kelantan after Pas left the coalition.

Throughout this period, Umno remained united even though it was embroiled in controversy over the arrest and jailing of then Umno Youth president Datuk Harun Idris.

The Umno tradition has always been of consensus. Just because Hussein and Dr Mahathir won their posts uncontested did not mean they did not have legitimacy or that there was no democracy in the party.

If all members decide in the party's general assembly there should be no contest, that in itself is an honourable endorsement and legitimises the victory of a candidate.

The supreme council merely offered advice and its main motivation, I believe, was the stability of Umno politics and party unity.

There was nothing illegal or wrong about the supreme council decision because every member had an opportunity to express his or her views. The decision was constitutionally correct because the council is given the mandate to act in the best interests of the party.

If it had directed that there should be no contest for all supreme council posts, then your writer would have been justified in saying it constituted dereliction of duties. There are many council members who run the risk of not being re-elected as a result of the decision, so they could not have been acting in their own interests.

There are those who argue that unity was a "pretext" to "suspend democracy". Others say Umno members have changed and they want "more democracy".

But if we reflect on our history and arrive at the conclusion that unbridled democracy has only weakened the party, we may agree that there is nothing wrong with reverting to the "undemocratic" practice of consensus and no-contest for certain posts unless absolutely necessary.

In 1981, Tan Sri Musa Hitam won the deputy presidency and was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. He was again challenged for the post in 1984 although Dr Mahathir advised against it.

But because the supreme council did not want to be accused of "suspending democracy" it did not take a stand on the contest for the number two post. The continued in-fighting saw Musa resign the following year and in the 1986 general election, Umno and the BN turned in a worse performance than in the 1982 election.

In 1987, the embers of the 1984 tussle grew into an inferno and there was a fight down the line for the top posts. Dr Mahathir and Ghafar won but the losers refused to accept the decision and took Umno to court. Only

Umno members know how orphaned and helpless they felt when the party was declared unlawful in February 1988 and had to suffer the humiliation of being invited back into the BN.

The losers of that election did not return to the Umno fold but teamed up with the Opposition under the Gagasan Rakyat banner. In 1990, we performed badly again, this time losing Kelantan to Pas.

Later, we had the Anwar crisis. Although not many members left Umno then, the discord was felt down the ranks.

In the run-up to the general election, Dr Mahathir advised us to close ranks. But as the election showed, there was a lot of internal sabotage, with some quarters even trying to get Dr Mahathir himself disqualified in Kubang Pasu.

Pas has already started campaigning for the next general election. But we in Umno are caught in our own quagmire of in-fighting.

One of the NST's articles acknowledges that Dr Mahathir is probably the best leader Malaysia has ever had. The majority of Malaysians who returned the Barisan Nasional to power with a two-thirds majority will not dispute that. The majority of Umno members will not dispute that either.

Therefore, after having worked with Abdullah for one year and after having anointed him as successor, is the NST writer disputing Dr Mahathir's wisdom in choosing him?

I want to make three points here which I believe justify why there should not be a contest for the top two posts.

- \* Any disruption in Umno because of elections for the posts will be welcomed by the Opposition.

- \* Disunity in Umno because of the elections will set us back in our efforts to fight our only worthy adversary, Pas; and

- \* Disaffection and in-fighting in Umno will frustrate those who have given us the mandate and expect us to work instead of saddling ourselves with problems of our own creation.

We must not forget that the MCA went for a no-contest for its top two posts last year to prevent disunity. Witness how well it performed in the general election although its deputy president Datuk Lim Ah Lek decided at the last minute not to contest.

Umno, too, has a war to face just like the MCA did in the early 80s when a tussle for the leadership caused the party to nearly lose its legitimacy and ultimately led to its worst performance in the 1990 election.

We have to start from now. If we get embroiled in small battles with each other, we risk losing the war in 2004. Only a small group of Umno members want to see a fight that will be destructive to the party we love and cherish.

Some are being egged on by ex-Umno members in Parti Keadilan Nasional and some by frustrated Umno politicians who were either dropped in the election or lost their seats and blame the party leadership for it.

Of course, the decision whether to nominate anyone to challenge Pak Lah or Dr Mahathir is ours at the divisional level. Democracy has not been suspended and we still have the right to determine what's best for us.

But I believe that the practice of democracy must be rooted in other considerations, such as unity and facing the external enemy. No political party will want to have unbridled democracy if its own survival was at stake.