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Time for Pemuda Umno to re-invent itself

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MONEY is power in American politics. It has always been so and shall always be so. It is also true of Malaysian politics, and it manifested itself in a big way in the 1987 Umno Supreme Council election. Now, money rules supreme.

As in the US, those who control the economy also manage politics. The difference is, in America it is open. In Malaysia it is circumspect and labyrinthine.

Machiavelli wrote 483 years ago that power is produced "either through craft or force". I would like to add, if I may, money, big dough.

Men and organisations are not powerful because they exist. Leaders and members make them so. Tom Wicker in "JFK and LBJ" said: "Rights are not honoured because they exist; men compel their recognition."

I am afraid the once-powerful Pemuda Umno which compelled Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra to set the date for Malayan independence or else... has through default acquiesced to its own emasculation.

It has become a passive, even ineffectual wing of Umno which is also under considerable threat from Pas and its junior partner Keadilan.

Pemuda Umno's main function seems to be reacting to events rather than spearheading a proactive agenda. It has an earnest if somewhat perplexing leader in the person of Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, but does he get the support of his executive committee? Even if he did, do you think the members are the types who appeal to young Bumiputera professionals and the ideologically charged and imbued, many of whom are joining the other Malay parties?

Malaysian democracy is dangerously damaging itself by what has been and is happening over Suqiu's demands and the counter-demands by the Peninsular Malay Students Association (GPMS). I have time and again written and spoken asking everyone to leave the long-settled sensitive issue (which led to the vicious May 13 1969 race riots) alone, but to no avail. Indeed, some quarters even encouraged and are still pressing for debates on the subject.

Little do they realise they are actually stoking a dangerous fire that can engulf the nation anytime.

Chauvinists, politicians and even newspapers are behaving in a manner demeaning to themselves as they compete with each other, determined to place their own racial advantage, partisan and even personal advantage above the interests of their country, and over peace and stability.

In all this, what is most striking is the blow that has been struck against Pemuda Umno which is very clear to every young Malay, but until now hardly anything of substance has been said on the matter.

The events which have led to Pemuda Umno's self-destruction are many, one of which is that it does not possess even a hint of an alternative viewpoint within the party.

I do not believe Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Umno president, curtails liberties in the name of greater and more centralised power for himself. Then who is to blame? What is it? Self-censorship, too much political correctness to secure ambition, or simply political ennui?

Pemuda Umno's traditional role as the vanguard, promoter, and protector of Malay nationalism and Islam has been seized by GPMS, which was once led by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Has Pemuda Umno become ineffectual because it lacks a well thought out

political programme? Whatever it is, Pemuda Umno's image among the Malays has suffered a great diminution because of its own doing.

I know neither the president of Umno nor Abdullah stifles Pemuda Umno. There is nothing to sap its vitality when none exists. What Pemuda Umno needs urgently is to re-discover the rationale for its existence, and recognisable political and social programmes. Perhaps, as a beginning, it should go back to basics - Umno ABCs, training, acquire ideological fundamentals and political skills.

In its 51 years, Pemuda Umno has produced two of the four prime ministers, Tun Razak and Tun Hussein Onn; but one of its illustrious leaders was Tun Sardon Jubir, who with his deputy Datuk Ahmad Badawi (Abdullah's father) unilaterally fixed the Merdeka date and forced the Tunku to accept it. Sardon became a long-time Cabinet minister and governor of Penang.

Umno Youth members may be persuaded to elect businessmen, but I can tell you straight that if that happens it won't be good for Pemuda Umno and may even hasten it on the road to irrelevance in Malay politics. Don't say I have not warned the party. The cynical young voters know leaders who are particularly unscrupulous about using money to secure party posts.

Nor will the young voters be impressed by titles - deserved or otherwise. The young Bumiputeras are looking for an intellectual, religious, scrupulous and credible political leadership. Sardon and Hussein were plain "mister" when they were Pemuda Umno chief. Razak was a hereditary Datuk.

The practical consequences of young leaders who obtained "undeserved honour" in particular bring disrepute in an increasingly egalitarian Malay politics. Shape up or lose out in the battle for the hearts and minds of the young who are generally lean and strongly imbued with idealism and imagination.

The Malays have entrusted their future to Umno since 1946. It has delivered, but can it continue to do so with an emasculated third-rate second echelon? Anything which further diminishes Pemuda Umno threatens Umno itself.

Separating themselves from the rest through an ostentatious lifestyle is not only iniquitous and politically unwise, but it makes the pretence of egalitarian democracy a farce.

Pemuda Umno is unwittingly, I am afraid, providing political fodder to Pas, Keadilan, and the Malay youth in general.

I know it is in the nature of all human beings, indeed it is inherent in the corrupting effect of these money bagmen, to appear superior, but they can't do this because they are in politics which is fast becoming ideologically charged again. Pemuda Umno should strive to reverse this money politics which has become a great burden on the party. Its leadership must choose between politics and business. One cannot do both, especially when it involves contracts and development in constituencies.

Pemuda Umno must become "young-people friendly". It will be a brave leader who will make Pemuda Umno more accessible to young Bumiputeras.

I should point out that Pemuda Umno and Umno are unfortunately perceived, though wrongly, as anxious to limit membership of young Bumiputera (and therefore dissent?). Unless Umno corrects this perception, and soon, it will be facing a most damaging protest, if not revolt, by 2004.

Pemuda Umno must make connection with young Bumiputeras. Go and reach out to the alienated Bumiputera young men and women everywhere, build bonds and maintain a conscientious nexus. If Pemuda Umno falters, half of the future electoral battle will already be lost.

Hishammuddin told me and others at closed-door meetings that he has

plans, imaginative programmes, I believe, and if they are attractive, serious and attainable, I will be Pemuda Umno's loudest cheerleader.

Please don't wait for another year to pass by. Pemuda Umno must not only be seen but heard as well. Hitherto, it has been seen and heard only once a year, during its annual conference.

I shan't keep quiet if some of the Pemuda Umno leaders continue to use money cynically to diminish democracy and compromise Malay sovereignty, for which Malay fathers and mothers and the present Pemuda Umno's grandparents fought so hard and sacrificed so much.

They made sacrifices to leave us a legacy which is now under threat all over again, in just half a century.

Saint-Exupery in "Flight to Arras" wrote: "Only he can understand what a farm is, what a country is, who shall have sacrificed part of himself to his farm or country."

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