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Umno Youth needs to chart new course to win back younger generation

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UMNO Youth's new line-up of State chiefs and appointed exco members has been unveiled - with no surprises.

Overall, it does not differ much from that of the movement's previous line-up in the sense that most of them are professionals in their 30s and fast approaching 40, the cut-off age for membership.

The CVs of the excos were distributed to the Press. No doubt, an impressive line-up one would say, comprising lawyers, architects, doctors and a dentist.

Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, in announcing his team on Thursday, decided to retain five State chiefs - Abdul Rahim Mohd Said (Terengganu), Zahari Kechik (Kelantan), Mohd Ismail Othman (Penang), Jamal Nasir Rashdi (Perak) and Dr Nasrah Salim (Johor).

The new faces were Ismail Kassim (Perlis), Abdul Wahab Din (Kedah), Datuk Mohd Zaini Salleh (Pahang), Dr Karim Mansor (Selangor), Ahmad Fauzi Zahari (Kuala Lumpur), Shaziman Abu Mansor (Negri Sembilan), Abdullah Salleh (Malacca) and Tawfiq Abu Bakar (Sabah).

Hishammuddin also appointed five exco members - Zein Isma Ismail, Datuk Wan Ahmad Farid, Jamilludin Junit, Sahar Sakar and Shamsul Najmi Shamsuddin.

Perhaps the most significant development is the inclusion of businessmen in the team and the fact that for the first time, a 25-year-old, Harrison Hassan, was made executive secretary to "represent the younger generation".

Hishammuddin had reiterated time and again in many of his speeches that the younger generation would be given a place in the movement for the future of Umno lay with young Malays.

Some detractors would however like to argue that the new line-up failed to reflect this. For a start, they say that only Harrison's appointment could be seen as one to represent his peers.

Hishammuddin, however, defended his move and was quick to point out that the appointment was sufficient and that Harrison was given an "important post".

"I can only appoint five people into the line-up, and since he got an important post, I think it is more than sufficient to get young professionals to contribute to our struggles."

However, an Umno veteran and former Youth leader said: "If Umno Youth truly wishes to live up to its claim as a youth movement, it needs to be in constant touch with the young Malays."

"To convince the young Malays that their future is intertwined with Umno's durability, Umno Youth must allow them to be part of the movement and hold some important posts."

He added that a formalised arrangement which offered the younger generation a chance to participate in the decision-making process would be a good training ground for them.

"Umno needs to experiment with new channels of communication because the informal network that has worked so far cannot cope with the demands of an expanding and increasingly articulate membership."

He said only by doing this would the younger Malays feel a sense of belonging to the party.

"They must remember, the young Malays who are disenchanted with the movement are more likely to stay away. But, nevertheless, this is a good

start and hopefully, this will be the prelude to more changes to come."

A political observer said looking at the line-up, one could not help but agree with the teentysomethings that the only reason why some of their peers want to join the party is because it can be a stepping stone to business deals and opportunities as the movement's leadership is dominated by businessmen.

"Never mind if all those stuff about struggling for the race, country and religion should come second."

Worse still, he added, those within or outside Umno might conclude that the movement is "the place to get position and power as well as business".

He said the kampung folk and the younger generation cannot be blamed for thinking that the movement is meant only for the elite and the rich who cannot truly understand or grasp the true meaning of struggling to make ends meet or the needs of the younger generation.

A political writer, when asked about the line-up, straight away said Umno Youth must remember that the politics of wealth and elitism has no place in an organisation that draws its strength from the grassroots.

The new line-up therefore must chart a new course and for the betterment of the movement.

To win back the respect of the younger generation, the movement must be able to articulate issues and chart a new and dynamic course to enable it to perform its watchdog functions and to harness its energies for the real task ahead.

"Even party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during his younger days spoke frankly on issues.

"His enthusiasm was evident in his speeches which dwelt on the nation and national leadership. Unfortunately, the movement is lacking in these youthful enthusiasm," said a party veteran.

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