

16/04/2000

Vital to win back the urban Malays

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IN the not-so-distant past, chaotic political meetings were associated with the MIC. Chair-throwing, fist-fights, invective and threats of murder almost became the party's trademark.

But Umno does not seem prepared to allow the MIC a monopoly on rowdiness at political meetings.

Somehow or other, a few of its divisions seem bent on upstaging the MIC on this.

The Bandar Tun Razak Umno division is the latest to make a serious attempt to upstage the MIC.

At two meetings, the first of which on March 26 was aborted and the other on Friday night, delegates added a new dimension to rowdiness.

These dissatisfied delegates, apart from hurling abuse, threw stink and smoke bombs, forcing others to search for tissue papers to cover their noses.

Bandar Tun Razak was the last of the 165 Umno divisions to hold its meeting. So the meetings, which started with Tawau on March 2, certainly got a rousing, if not exactly respectable, ending.

More interesting is the fact that Bandar Tun Razak is considered an urban division. Perhaps the delegates were not aware, because there was nothing urbane about the behaviour of some of them.

At the same time, its more rural counterparts seemed to be more "refined" and understood what decorum is all about.

In essence, this is what the Umno divisional meetings and the May 11 party elections are about.

The divisions, when deciding on their nominees hope that the candidates of their choice will provide the leadership for the party as it moves towards the post-Mahathir era.

At the same time, the present leadership and the ones to take over will have to ensure that Umno does not remain too heavily dependent on rural-based support. They must be able to capture the imagination of the more urban Malays to remain relevant.

In the last general election, it was obvious that Umno did not get ample support from the urban-based Malays who are generally led by the middle-class.

It is vital that the present and future Umno leadership win back the urban Malays as they tend to be influential opinion makers, especially when they touch base in the rural divisions.

Furthermore, Umno's efforts to produce more middle-class Malays have been intensified, and if the party cannot ensure urban-based support, it is going to be caught in a political dilemma of its own creation.

On the one hand, Umno is responsible for the burgeoning Malay middle-class and, on the other, its own creation may become ultimately responsible for its downfall.

Hence the reason why the nominations from the 165 divisions are very important for the party leadership.

Of course, the focus has been on nominations for top party posts - the president, deputy president, vice-presidents and the Wanita and Youth chiefs.

At the same time, nominations for the 25 supreme council member posts, though they do not get the same attention, are scrutinised by party members at all levels.

The way the nominations went, especially for the posts of the president and deputy president, it was obvious that the divisions had heeded the supreme council's advice that there should be no contest for the top two posts.

Despite earlier rumblings that Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah would be nominated to take on either Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for the presidency or Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for the deputy presidency, the challenge did not materialise.

As it turned out, Tengku Razaleigh only qualified to contest for the vice-presidency.

It means that the divisions have spoken and that some of the divisions considered him suitable to contest for one of the three posts of vice-president.

At the same time, there are some in Umno who worry that former leaders who have been tainted may win the posts for which they are vying.

Here is a question about where the leaders' love lies - for the party or their own personal ends.

As an Umno member said:

"If these tainted leaders truly love Umno they will not take up their nominations. Previously, even after they relinquished their posts, we had a difficult time improving Umno's image.

"If these leaders manage to make a comeback, the party and all its members will have to share and carry the burden of their tarnished image."

This is, however, up to the 2,000-odd delegates. They will determine who among the candidates nominated should be the party's torch bearers as it moves into more challenging times.

The next worry is whether the delegates will vote with an independent mind and not be influenced by money or other personal considerations.

That is the tough part - even candidates vying for posts find themselves caught in the battle of wills.

Said one supreme council qualifier:

"The saying is bagi salah, tak bagi kalah (to give is wrong and not to give means losing)."

The problem is very real, especially when the party is dependent on the delegates to assist it in selecting leaders for the future who are committed and dedicated to the party cause.

Somehow or other, the problem of money politics is closely related to the fact of the burgeoning middle-class Malays who, after getting material comforts, are moving forward to secure social status.

At the same time, for non bona fide candidates, securing a position in Umno means greater opportunities for material gain.

Such is the entangling web of power and wealth in Umno that to avoid getting caught in it will require a very strong and determined character.

These activities have not been confined to the urban divisions. Over the years they have spread to the most remote divisions.

Given these developments, it should not be surprising if the behaviour of some of the urban Bandar Tun Razak delegates spread to the more rural divisions.

But party leaders should attempt to explain to the rural divisions that there is nothing sophisticated or "cool" about using stink bombs to make a point.

If anything, such action stinks to the high heavens.