

Joining to serve and not be served

STAR 24 APR 2001

FORMER Umno secretary general Tan Sri Mustafa Jabar used to tell his listeners that in the early days of the party, members were reluctant to hold positions because they feared offending their friends.

The members, mostly teachers, clerks and farmers, had to be coaxed or even forced to hold positions.

Local party meetings were held in the homes of members with simple refreshments prepared by their wives.

The scenario is different today, as businessmen in shiny expensive cars from Kuala Lumpur return to their villages during weekends to run the local Umno meeting.

The teachers and village heads have been pushed aside by these corporate figures with plenty of money to throw.

Unlike the old Umno where the teachers used their grassroots influence to win votes, these urban politicians are of-

The cancer of money politics appears to be eating into Umno and threatens to ruin the party. Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad diagnosed the illness and has for years tried to remove this social disease. He recently proposed that the extremely rich be barred from holding party posts. WONG CHUN WAI examines the 'money dilemma' in Umno.

fering more practical and attractive means to win votes — money.

Footing the bill for food and drinks is nothing in comparison to holiday trips overseas and cash handouts.

When a businessman spends RM1mil to win a division post, he is either an extremely generous member who is totally committed to the struggles of Umno or he thinks he can reap his "investment" with more profits.

Malaysians, including even party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, can be

forgiven if they have their suspicions.

For the past two decades, Dr Mahathir has raised the question of money politics without fail at every general assembly of the party.

He has advised, threatened, pleaded and even cried to get the Umno members to wake up.

It is hardly a new theme.

On Saturday, Dr Mahathir suggested that extremely rich Umno members be barred from contesting top party posts.

Branch and division chiefs

would also not be given government contracts under the proposal aimed at keeping away those who want to join the party for the sake of getting financial gains.

The proposals, he added, included declarations of assets by those vying for top posts in the branches and divisions and seats in the supreme council.

The Prime Minister said he was told many Malays lacked interest to join and support Umno because of alleged corrupt practices by its leaders.

Such perceptions, he said, could ruin the party and country if members did not take them seriously.

Many members are bound to question the practicality of Dr Mahathir's proposal to bar the rich from contesting party posts but it has certainly jolted the party's rank and file.

The proposal will probably spark a debate which will serve the party well in the run-

money politics will never go away.

The fight against money politics and corruption does not end with the resignation of a government leader.

Unless he is brought to justice, Malaysians will continue to have a cynical view of corruption and if such scepticism persists and is effectively exploited by the opposition, the ruling coalition will end up paying a heavy price.

Umno is today perceived as a get-rich-quick club because politics and business have become so intertwined.

The New Economic Policy has served the Malays well by producing a new breed of confident and educated Malays, with entrepreneurial skills in business and other professions.

Many of these *Melayu Baru* profited from the affirmative action programmes allowing them easier access to loans,

Malays struggling to earn a living, from the factory workers to the fishermen, who find it difficult to understand the temptation of money among Umno members.

It cannot be denied that the practice of money politics is already entrenched in Umno. It will not be enough for Dr Mahathir and other leaders to merely make speeches to condemn the practice.

The businessmen, who control the divisions, will continue to strengthen their political positions because they assume politics provides the means to wealth.

Barring the rich from holding positions will not stop the poor and middle class from going into politics to get rich.

It is better to have a politician with no worries of money than to have a struggling politician who cannot even run his family budget.

Running a modern party

up to the three-day party general assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre from June 20.

By Dr Mahathir's own admission, the years of money politics have taken its toll on the party.

Money politics, smear campaigns and intense politicking have led to a crisis of confidence.

The 1999 general election saw an erosion

of support for Umno among the Malays and unless serious efforts are made to address the real concerns, the party would have a tough time in the next general election, scheduled for 2004.

Umno leaders spend money to win a division post because they presume that holding the chairmanship of the division will increase their chances of becoming a candidate for a seat in parliament or the state assemblies.

Those who lose their division seats run the risk of losing their grip on their political careers.

But the greatest threat to Umno is the perception that Umno leaders enjoy favourable access to business opportunities.

To the public and even Umno members, it is the Umno patronage that determines their chances of getting projects and tenders.

Unless there is greater transparency in our system of awarding business contracts,

shares, business licences, permits and contracts.

But there are also many middle-class Malays who also gained from these policies by getting university degrees,

Barring the rich from holding positions will not stop the poor and middle class from going into politics to get rich. It is better to have a politician with no worries of money than to have a struggling politician who cannot even run his family budget.

but they did not become businessmen.

Many of these educated Malays, comprising the liberals and religious, make up the bulk of those who now question the practice of money politics and the rich *Umnoputras*.

It must be these groups of university lecturers, government officers and even soldiers and policemen who look at the Umno leaders with scorn for their corrupt ways that Dr Mahathir meant.

These Malays do not talk about Malay rights.

Their concerns are corruption, nepotism, transparency and justice and these issues will continue to influence them in their voting pattern unless they are tackled effectively.

Never mind the fact that those exploiting the issues include those in the opposition parties who have unexplained wealth.

Not all Malays become rich from the NEP, we must be clear. There are many poor

machinery, even at local level, can be expensive as full-time clerks and secretaries must be hired.

It will also be difficult to draw the line. There are many capable and sincere Umno leaders who are also wealthy.

It is not a sin to be rich if wealth is accumulated through honest means. But ethical, moral and even legal questions come in when money is used to score political gains.

In the Klang Valley, having one or two double-storey houses in a suburb like Subang Jaya, two cars, savings and stocks is enough to make a person a millionaire.

But the millionaire, at least on paper, would probably be still struggling to earn his living. He would probably only consider himself in the upper-middle class bracket and certainly not rich.

Political patronage has to end and a political post must not guarantee a seat or contract.

This is the only way for the party and plenty of political will is needed.

Dr Mahathir has, in the past, refused to appoint certain Umno leaders to government positions because of strong suspicions that they used money to win their elections.

Politicians, irrespective of their parties, must understand that they enter politics to serve and not be served.