

Barring rich will make Umno poor

While Mahathir's proposal reflects an urgent need to curb money politics, some fear a backlash

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KUALA LUMPUR: Well-heeled folk may have to forget about a career in politics, if a suggestion from the Umno president and prime minister is accepted.

Concerned about the damage that money politics is causing to the party's image, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir proposed last week that rich Malays should not hold top political positions.

Despite numerous past warnings, the issue of money politics surfaces during every Umno election, at both the national and divisional levels.

The party's disciplinary board has received about 400 complaints on corruption and misuse of power in the current divisional elections.

Even Umno's new code of ethics - adopted in February - outlining stern punishment for vote buying failed to deter those with cash to splash.

Observers say the practice is deeply entrenched in the organisation. According to an Umno branch official, concern is growing that rich businessmen who control some divisions are neglecting their party responsibilities to the grassroots.

On the other hand, committed leaders are not being recognised and find it difficult to move up the hierarchy.

Mahathir's proposal signals the urgent need to stop the rot. While the move has been welcomed, many are doubtful that barring the rich from holding party positions will eliminate the practice.

Some party insiders even fear a backlash within Umno if the supreme council endorses the proposal.

In the larger context, the idea may also conflict with Umno's strategy of developing an entrepreneurial class and would discourage successful young professionals from joining the party.

This in return will only profit opposition parties such as PAS which has been readily welcoming them.

The rich should not made to bear the brunt of the current situation, say these party elders, because they

too are the products of Umno's own policies aimed at creating an affluent Malay society.

Hence, these policies are partly to be blamed, they say.

When the New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched in 1971 to create a strong bumiputra entrepreneurial class, large government contracts were awarded to hand-picked divisional leaders to jump-start Umno's ambitious programme.

These beneficiaries went on to become state assemblymen and members of parliament in the early phase of the policy.

Some 20 years later, Umno's thrust has produced the desired results - a pool of rich businessmen who also enjoy strong political connections.

However, having made it, they continue to guard their positions jealously in order to reap further benefits from government projects, say the veterans.

Losing their grip on their divisions may mean an end to their political influence.

"Umno's programme to increase the number of corporate people was successful; the problem now is how to deal with them," says Dr Kamarulzaman Askandar, a political science analyst at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

"Denying the rich political positions will not solve money politics; even the poor are involved. It has become the political culture in Umno."

Umno now faces two sets of problems: ageing leaders who are determined to cling on to their positions at all costs; and an intensifying struggle for divisional posts among younger aspirants hungry for the lucrative rewards of office.

The symptoms of this cancer have become increasingly clear over the years: divisional campaigns have been growing more and more strident over the 80s and 90s.

This trend is worrying Umno leaders.

"Malays who are not rich but have the potential may ask some *towkays* to finance them. Once in power, they pay their sponsors back by awarding them business contracts," says Shahbudin Embun, legal adviser to the public welfare and complaints bureau of Umno Wilayah Persekutuan.

A big cost to the party,

Shahbudin says, is that genuine party supporters without financial backing are being sidelined. The leaders who bribe their way into Umno, on the other hand, use their time in office to make more money.

"Many are career businessmen who head large companies and have no time for politics. They use campaign managers to buy votes to maintain their positions," he adds.

Others note that corporate figures-turned-politicians are more interested in securing government contracts than with helping the party to uplift the lot of the Malays.

"Those who join Umno should not have any personal interest, except to champion the party's struggles," says Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, who was appointed the party executive secretary at the last general assembly. "I am a successful businessman today because of the NEP and I want to contribute to the party."

"But the rich now join Umno to buy positions," Tengku Adnan says.

Ironically, Umno had at one point invited rich Malays to join the party to boost its image.

"The prime minister invited them to join so that they can contribute to the nation," says Subahan Kamal, an executive committee member of Umno Youth.

"But these people have become ambitious and have no time to serve the party."

"Not all rich people are using money though; some are actively involved but there are others who use proxies."

This erosion of integrity is leaving a marked impact among the ranks. "Dejected Umno members are joining the opposition. Umno is losing dedicated leaders this way," says Subahan.

Dissenting members feel that excluding the rich from party posts is unfair as money politics has become so common that it is difficult to isolate the violaters.

"I reject the idea because it is against human rights and democracy," says Datuk Ibrahim Ali, head of Umno Pasir Mas in Kelantan.

"The grassroots also practise money politics; the poor are sponsored by the rich."

The analyst Kamarulzaman cautions that excluding wealthy politicians will only mean more trouble for Umno, which is already under pressure because of divided support for the party.

"It is difficult to determine who is rich and who is poor. One may have to disclose one's wealth in order to join the party and many may not like to do this. This will create a division between the haves and the have-nots."

"It is a step backwards for Umno," says Kamarulzaman. "The party may have to revert to its old methods, relying on teachers and village chiefs to lead the party, instead of young professionals."

As a mass-based organisation with more than two million members - spanning the spectrum of society from farmers to corporate leaders - the eradication of money politics in Umno is not going to be an easy task.

Party stalwarts worry that the practice has been too deeply ingrained and will require strong political will to eliminate.