

Dwell not in glory of the past

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THE message is clear — Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is in no mood to compromise over the continuing practice of money politics in the party.

It's not the first time that Dr Mahathir has made such a statement, admitting that he had pleaded and even cried to drive the message home.

Speaking at a gathering to mark the 55th anniversary of Umno, Dr Mahathir warned that there will be no more urging, no more pleading and no more crying.

The Prime Minister told his listeners which included 1,400 veterans that he would come down hard on money politics.

Last week, the party suspended six members over allegations that they dabbled in money politics during internal elections.

Five also had their rights to vote forfeited and their rights to contest party elections suspended for six years.

Those suspended were charged with breaking the party's code of ethics by taking part in money politics during the election of divisional leaders. They were accused of giving money, throwing parties or providing overseas trips as a way to influence internal elections. One of the accused was a state executive councillor.

The fact is that money politics is merely a polite word for corruption.

As Dr Mahathir himself admitted recently, the perception of many Malaysians is that Umno has been riddled with money politics.

Rightly or wrongly, many people, including even Umno members, assume that joining the party is one way of becoming rich.

Umno aspirants are prepared to fork out millions of ringgit to buy votes, believing that they will reap profits from their investment.

These crooked politicians believe that if they are elected as division heads, they would stand a better chance of being picked to contest a state or parliament seat.

Some Umno members even believe that their membership is enough to win them a contract for a project.

On Monday, Dr Mahathir said Umno must be cleansed of money politics, adding that the people would never believe that corrupt leaders could set up a good government to serve them effectively.

The people, he rightly pointed out, will not pick the party leaders if they think that these candidates are corrupt. He added that Umno would lose members if its members did not close ranks after the election process.

In the past, Umno members used to laugh at the fisticuffs and chair-throwing at MIC meetings.

But such squabbles no longer take place in MIC meetings only but also in Umno meetings.

Over the past weeks, there have been reports of fights and even one reported stabbing.

In Libaran, Sabah, police had to be brought in as tension ran high over a hotly contested division election.

Money politics is not the only problem afflicting Umno. Party discipline seems to be badly missing from the party now. Dr Mahathir has correctly pointed out that greed is the problem.

Umno leaders cannot hope to win the hearts and minds of the young if they perceive that self-interest is the only preoccupation of the party leaders. The party's history of struggle against colonialism will not be enough to convince the young to join the party.

Umno cannot live on the glory of its past; it has to prove to the young that it is still relevant and that it feels and believes in the sentiments of the young.

As the backbone of the Barisan Nasional, it has been successful in producing a new class of confident, educated and successful group of Malay middle class. Many of these young professionals, however, do not believe that they have to be thankful and obligated to the Government for their positions and it will be the Government's mistake if it continues to remind them.

The young Malays are concerned with issues such as corruption, justice and freedom of expression and, unless these concerns are

addressed, the opposition will continue to chip away at the support for Umno.

That aside, the leaders of Umno Youth deserve to play a bigger role in the Government. In comparison with Parti Keadilan Nasional and even PAS, many Umno leaders are already past 50 years old.

Umno Youth leaders have proven their maturity in handling controversial issues. In the case of the failure of top non-bumiputra students to get entry into universities, Umno Youth has demonstrated its moderation through its statements.

They have come out better than some yesterday heroes who have attempted to return to mainstream Umno politics by trying to play the nationalistic card to garner support.

The statements of these Umno Youth leaders, in calling for more non-bumiputra students to be admitted into public universities, reflect their calibre as potential leaders not just for the Malays but for all Malaysians.

The task of Umno has become tougher because of increasing competition from Keadilan and PAS.

But unlike these two parties, Umno continues to receive the support of not just Malays but other ethnic groups who are more comfortable with its brand of politics of consensus.

As Umno celebrates its 55th anniversary, its leaders and members have to bear in mind that only they can prove to Malaysians that the party has not reached retirement age but is still relevant.

