

# MAF offers new

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**THEY sat bersila (cross-legged) on the floor as a symbolic gesture of Malay tradition. Described by critics as "political has-beens," the people behind the Malay Action Front however should not be so easily dismissed. Indeed, it adds a new dimension to the current political scenario, writes SHAHANAAZ SHER HABIB.**

FOR Datuk Ibrahim Ali, the setting up of the Malay Action Front (MAF) can be likened to a food stall.

"Although there already are many other stalls, there is nothing wrong with opening a new stall.

"Let the people decide which stall serves the tastiest *mee*," he said in a press conference a day before the MAF solidarity gathering.

Ibrahim, who is the MAF coordinating chairman, used the analogy to justify why he believed there was still room for yet another Malay body in the seemingly already crowded field.

And if the Sunday solidarity gathering at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) was anything to go by, the body led by "Umno activists" is trying to steal the thunder from the opposition.

Besides echoing the Umno line in calling for Malay unity and issuing a warning to non-Malays not to mess with Malay rights, it went as far as to lash out at the Government and criticise the country's top leader Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

They claimed only a few benefited from a number of privatisation projects, accused local conglomerates of being greedy and called for scholarships instead of loans to be given to bumiputra students at universities.

A few speakers spoke up for the segment of Malays who they believe are being marginalised — the police, armed forces, civil servants, fishermen and farmers.

Such comments could have easily come from the opposition.

And in fact in the past — the yearly Umno general assembly being an exception — such hard-hitting comments aired so publicly have almost always been exclusively an opposition domain.

So what is this group trying

to do?

It would appear that by having Umno members indulge in this form of self-criticism, the motive is to try and neutralise the influence of the opposition and win back Malay support.

After all, if Umno is aware of its weaknesses and are talking and doing something about it, there would be no more grounds for the opposition to attack them on that front.

Some claim the venue and the fact that the gathering was granted a police permit was an indication that this could be a new Umno strategy stage-managed by the Umno top leadership or an "unseen hand" to woo the Malays back.

Yet from the harsh attacks against Dr Mahathir, it would be hard to believe this was stage-managed by him.

After all, MAF "advised" the Prime Minister to listen to views from the ground and even told him to "clean up his Cabinet."

But clearly, the public airing of such critical views seemed to have caught others within the party off guard.

A former Umno Youth exco member who declined to be named said bluntly: "I can't understand what they are trying to do. They are still part and parcel of Umno.

"You can't have a party within a party — a *pembang-kang* (opposition) within Umno."

Another former Youth exco member, Zahari Wahab, said MAF should not be emotive and jump on the bandwagon of the opposition and criticise policies just for the sake of criticising.

"That does not resolve anything. The matters raised are the very issues that have been the priority of the Government all this while.

"It is not a fair comment to say that Malay groups have been marginalised. If you say what the Government has done is not enough, what are

your suggestions? You must offer effective solutions," he said.

Zahari noted many good things have come out of the Government's privatisation policy such as a good road system, many new townships, enhanced value of villages, economic activities and new jobs.

"So why highlight only the bad?" he asked.

Every policy, he noted, had its weaknesses and there were "proper channels" for people, including Umno members, to air their views.

"Let us not be presumptuous that these are not known to the Government. Let us be fair and look at the total policy rationally," he said.

A former Youth exco member who is now a corporate figure noted that the leaders in MAF who are speaking out had once served in the Government.

"They had their chance. What did they do when they were in the Government?" he asked.

Some of the MAF leaders include Deputy Information Minister Datuk Khalid Yunus, Deputy Health Minister Datuk

# political flavour

Dr Suleiman Mohamed, former minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Ibrahim Ali, former deputy agriculture minister Datuk Suhaimi Kamaruddin, Kedah state exco member Datuk Zakaria Said, former MP Tamrin Ghafar and Datuk Mazlan Harun.

For some, MAF offers hope to help rejuvenate an ailing Umno.

An Umno divisional leader said he expected Sunday's gathering to be "another round of Ibrahim Ali theatrics but was pleased with the rabbit that was pulled out of his hat."

This being Ibrahim's proposal for a task force to look into the Malay problem pertaining to the police, armed forces, farmers and fishermen and to draw up a second New Economic Policy.

Tun Ghafar Baba who was present at the MAF gathering agreed to chair it.

Ibrahim said a number of prominent Malays including Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, Prof Ungku Aziz, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, Tan Sri Awang Had Salleh,

Tan Sri Nordin Sopiee, Datuk Maznah Jalil and Tan Sri Harun Hashim would be invited to be in it.

Former Youth exco member Tamunif Mokhtar said the proposal seemed to put MAF on the right track because those named in the task force were among the brains in the country who really understood the Malays and the situation on the ground.

"The task force only lacks economists," he said.

The second NEP proposal, he said, offered the opportunity to relook at some things like education and "sometimes it is better to revert to the good old system."

Understandably, there are sceptics.

The Youth exco member who declined to be named said he had a feeling that a number of those named would turn down the invitation.

"It would be different if it came from a non-partisan group like academics," he said.

Some also say the MAF which is made up mostly of former Umno Youth executive council members was set up

because the current Umno Youth movement has been ineffective in attracting the youths.

Following the sacking of former deputy party president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the youths seem more inclined towards the opposition's *reformasi* movement.

Thus these old guards of former Umno Youth executive councils felt they had to step in to arrest the situation.

Tamunif also noted that in the last Umno election, delegates made it clear that they wanted "something fresh" by voting in more non-government people into the supreme council.

"They want a more transparent and open Umno," he said.

He said as both Khalid and Suleiman who spoke at the gathering were also Supreme Council members, "the two should also say the same things that were said at the gathering during the council meetings."

As for MAF's advice to Dr Mahathir to listen to the grassroots, Zahari believes the Prime Minister does listen and it is unfair to say otherwise.

"I defer vehemently and profusely to the statement that the PM does not listen.

"I wrote to him last week, giving him constructive criticisms on the Umno system and a solution to it.

"And, of course, I believe he reads every letter he receives.

"But you can't expect him to be manning a table of complaints," he said.

Although MAF's intentions may be noble and for the good of Umno, in politics it is often difficult to predict how things will turn out.

And going back to Ibrahim's analogy of the MAF and the food stall, it is up to the people to pick which stall they eat at and which *mee* they like best.

But MAF also must ensure that its stall, stall owner and food handlers themselves should be clean and that food being dished out is hygienic.

A tasty but unclean bowl of *mee* would only land people in hospital because of food poisoning.