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A re-engineered Umno

UMNO has always been more than just a political party. Apart from projecting the political strength of the Malays who form the majority race in multi-racial Malaysia, it also embodies the hopes and aspirations of the Malays in taking their rightful place in a broader economic, social and cultural context in the country. There is no doubt that they would have been much worse off if there had been no Umno to lead and guide them over the last decades.

But Umno is now faced with some serious challenges which members and leaders have to deal with if the party is to maintain its dominant position in the nation's political life and to attract the younger and better educated Malays and other Bumiputeras to its ranks. There have been calls for Umno to re-invent and re-engineer itself to overcome these challenges and to strengthen Umno's links with the Malay grassroots, especially the younger generation.

Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has made the point very clear that Umno members, including those found guilty by the party over money politics, must support the supreme council's efforts to stamp out the scourge. Umno must show to the people that it is serious in cleansing itself of corrupt leaders and Dr Mahathir has rightly called on all members to accept the findings of the party's disciplinary board. Umno's efforts to strengthen and re-engineer itself to reach out to as many Malays as possible must obviously encompass the important roles of Wanita Umno, Umno Youth and the new Puteri Umno as well. It must be admitted that the inroad made by the Opposition in the last general election is partly due to the weaknesses in Umno itself, caused by too many members and leaders who were more interested in pursuing material wealth rather than serving the rakyat.

Umno members must not forget that they can become strong only with the support of the rakyat.

Umno has been able to stay in power because it has managed to change and adapt to changing circumstances and tackle any crisis which arises. The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971 was implemented in response to the 1969 racial incident which exposed the serious economic and social imbalances in the country. This fundamental re-orientation of the national agenda also served to strengthen Umno itself. On hindsight, therefore, the NEP and Umno's response to the challenges sparked by the 1969 incident could be interpreted as efforts to re-engineer Umno to deal with the pressing issues at that time.

But, ironically, the legacy of the NEP and its success in uplifting the economic and financial status of the Malays has brought in its wake the seeds of the money politics, corruption, complacency and greed which if unchecked, will severely damage the image and what is worse, threaten the survival of the party itself. Umno could have failed the Malays, and with it the nation itself comprising the other races as well, if it had not managed to re-engineer itself and come out with resolute policies to reduce the imbalances between the Malays and the other races. The nation is grateful to the Umno members and their leaders for their wisdom then for saving the nation.

The challenge for the members and leaders of Umno now is no less important. For the sake of the party, they should give their whole-hearted support to Dr Mahathir's call to completely reject money politics, clean

up the party of corruption and to expunge any greed for material gain at the expense of party interest. There is no time to lose.

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