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MAF should work out ways to help Umno reach out to the grassroots

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EDUCATIONIST Professor Tan Sri Awang Had Salleh was not alone in feeling "confused and cheated" after attending the rally organised by Barisan Bertindak Melayu (Malay Action Front) at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur on Feb 4.

He, and many others, were under the impression that the rally, themed Takkan Melayu Hilang Di Dunia (Malays will not perish from the Earth) was for Malay unity where the Malays could come together and listen to words of wisdom from some of the country's freedom fighters, Umno veterans and other political activists.

The rally that afternoon, as the organisers had promised, was peaceful. But many were witnesses to fiery speeches, criticising the Government and Umno leadership.

Many questioned the motive of the organisers in holding the gathering. Why did the speakers, who are themselves Umno members, hit hard at the Government and party leadership?

Awang Had and several prominent Malays who were invited to the rally went there to show support for this sincere gesture during a time when the Malays are divided by political predilections and perceived ideologies.

Perhaps, the presence of former Deputy Umno president and Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ghafar Baba who was slated to address the crowd had lent credence and credibility to the event. Ghafar, after all, is a true Umno veteran and a leader known for his skills in bringing together opposing forces.

Awang Had himself was invited to speak.

Certainly, the event promised to be inspiring under such challenging circumstances. The MAF, to begin with, comprises Umno members and once-prominent party leaders and personalities. They no longer hold significant positions in the party.

They include Datuk Mazlan Harun who is secretariat chairman, Datuk Ibrahim Ali (its co-ordinator), Datuk Suhaimi Kamaruddin (a former Umno Youth head) and Tajuddin Rahman (a former Perak Umno Youth deputy chairman).

Ibrahim, days before the rally, said that it would not "be linked to politics" but was an opportunity to discuss Malay issues which are threatening the future of the race.

He gave an assurance that the gathering would be non-violent, non-confrontational and non-political. That the group decided to hold such a gathering in the wake of several race-related incidents, in particular the petition by the Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeals Committee (Suqiu), was purely coincidental, he said.

It was not, Ibrahim said, a reaction to the Suqiu petition.

In other words, the rally was neither racial nor racially-motivated. It was aimed at creating awareness of the need to protect Malay rights.

In fact, the group had invited Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor and Parti Keadilan Nasional Youth leader Mohd Ezam Mohd Noor who naturally did not turn up.

When the MAF announced its plan to hold such an event, there was hardly any outburst of enthusiasm.

This is not to say that people were dismissing the value or benefit of such a gathering because the organisers managed to attract a crowd of some 4,000.

The direction the platform took came as a shock. So no one can be blamed for thinking that it was a platform wrongly used, a right (to hold such an event) abused. After all, the organisers were confident that their application for a police permit would be approved.

Nobody, of course, is questioning the sincerity of the group in holding the rally.

What is in question now is whether the speeches were planned? Were they made by design or was it a case of the orators in question getting carried away by the crowd and the mood?

(The two speakers who were said to have been hard-hitting were Mazlan and Tajuddin.)

What could have been bouquets did not come. What the MAF got were brickbats. They could not have expected anything else given what had happened.

Umno leaders, rightly or wrongly, criticised the MAF.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin attempted to be fair in his assessment when he said that the initial intention to hold the rally was good but "perhaps they went overboard, inspired by the large crowd".

Some do not agree. Take, for instance, the theme. Does it reflect modern-day conditions? Are the Malays really struggling to survive on the face of the Earth (read: in Malaysia)?

"The theme in itself is provocative. The Malays will not perish, literally or figuratively. If it is not Umno, it is Pas, who will lead the Malays. Both are Malay parties. Whose survival are we talking about?" asked a political observer.

He said that while the intention was good and reflected much sincerity, the event only demonstrated the frustration of the MAF, represented by the speakers.

As Umno members themselves, the MAF can channel their grouses and grievances through party channels.

"Certainly, if their motive was to hit at the leadership, then the rally was an easy way to do so ... to perhaps regain their popularity and prominence by putting themselves in the limelight."

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in Kota Kinabalu on Monday that with the inception of the MAF, the Malays are now further divided into four - under Umno, Pas, Keadilan and MAF.

But the MAF has dismissed this saying, first of all, that the entire event has been "blown out of proportion".

"We are sincere in our struggle to unite the Malays. We are one thousand per cent for Malay unity.

"In fact, our so-called hard-hitting speech against the Government was just five per cent, the rest is all for the Government," said Datuk Jamaluddin Abu Bakar, its information chief.

To be fair, the MAF has formed a task force, headed by Ghafar who will prepare a memorandum on "The Malay Interests" to be handed to Dr Mahathir in June.

Nevertheless, the MAF should perhaps work out ways to help Umno in its agenda to revitalise the party, given that Umno is seeking contact with the grassroots.

Moreover, Pas and Umno are already well on their way to discussing the issue of Malay unity.

This is not the time to make the waters murkier. It is also not a time for anyone to have any hidden political agenda. Already, the MAF's noble intention has been misconstrued by the event of Feb 4. Many are counting on the "wise old men" of MAF to put things right.

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