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Mood for change towards a clean party

Harun Hashim

THE recently concluded Umno divisional elections has disclosed a desire on the part of the membership for changes in the leadership of the party. This is not unusual in itself but the process has shown that generally, leaders who have overstayed or past leaders attempting a comeback are no longer welcome.

The current mood for change can be partly attributed to the determination of party President, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, who wants Umno to be a clean and dedicated political party for the good of the party and the nation. Towards this objective he wants an end to money politics, the very rich should not contest for party posts and heads of divisions and branches will not be awarded government contracts.

Generally, the divisional elections were conducted smoothly except for technical difficulties here and there.

In one instance, the ballot paper had to be reprinted before voting commenced because of a spate of last minute withdrawals.

In the reprinted ballot paper, the number allotted to candidates were changed resulting in some confusion with electors not knowing whether they should vote according to the number or the name of the candidate. Whilst candidates nominated for election are free to withdraw, they should not be allowed to do so less than seven days before the election.

Numbers allotted to candidates nominated for election should not be changed for any reason because not every member knows personally all the candidates standing for election.

There seems to be a practice to provide members with a slate they should vote for. Thus, where there are two contestants for the leadership of the division, a list is provided in respect of all other contestants to be voted for together with their preferred head. Such practice promotes factionalism in the party. Wisdom however, has prevailed with members voting for candidates from both lists.

In the past, UMNO members were not adverse to making all sorts of allegations against other members during party elections as a means to sabotage the winning chances of their rivals contesting for party posts.

The culture prevails. Already there are more than 300 allegations of money politics and three sets of panels have been appointed by the party to determine the truth of the allegations.

Severe disciplinary action will be taken against those found guilty of wrong-doing. It is to be hoped that even if one isolated case is substantiated, the strong disciplinary action proposed will be taken against the member concerned if only to maintain the credibility of the party.

It is in the nature of party politics that to claim legitimacy to leadership, the politician should first gain elected leadership of his own party before going to the people in a general election.

In the UMNO hierarchy, the leadership of the party division is the key to fame and fortune, politically speaking. Hence the keen contests for Ketua Bahagian of the recently concluded divisional elections.

In most democracies, party leadership precedes a general election so that the electorate is assured that the candidate standing for election at least has the support of his own party.

Such prior qualification is also good for party discipline and eliminates the patronage culture where politicians without party support

but with personal linkages to the party leadership are chosen and endorsed by the party at a general election.

Such candidates invariably are easy fodder for the party contesting against it.

By an accident of history and timing, politicians elected in the 1999 general election and even holding public office at present have lost the leadership of their divisions at the recently concluded divisional elections.

The rightful consequence would be for such politicians to resign from public office if holding such office and from the legislature. This will result in the holding of by-elections.

To avoid such situations, it is important that all political parties in future should hold party elections before the general election, beginning with party elections in 2003 to precede the general election of 2004.

UMNO is not only the dominant party in the government, but has also provided leadership in political party structures.

The MIC recently announced that it is amending its party constitution to provide for elected leaders at all levels in preparation for party elections in 2003.

The MCA is due to hold party elections in 2002. Perhaps they have a case to postpone it to 2003.

UMNO Deputy President, Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, has directed UMNO members to turun padang after the divisional elections to start working for the next general election.

This is as it should be because in a parliamentary democracy, the Prime Minister can call for a general election at any time before the expiry of its five-year term.

Parliamentary democracy does not begin and end with a general election. Its real practice is between general elections.

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