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Never a dull moment in Malaysian politics

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DURING recent weeks we have been given an insight into the relationship between leaders and members of political parties. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, the president of Umno, has more than once reminded and extolled members to be loyal to the party and not to individual leaders.

The party and what it stands for, he said, is more important than individual leaders.

The personality cult unfortunately afflicts most Asians.

Indians practically worshipped Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) the independence leader. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), India's first Prime Minister, founded India's political dynasty. His daughter, Indira (1917-1984) became Prime Minister twice.

His grandson Rajiv Gandhi (1945-1991) succeeded his mother Indira as Prime Minister after she was assassinated. Rajiv was later assassinated and now the Indians want his widow or son or daughter to lead them.

Mohamad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948), the founder of Pakistan; Sukarno (1901-1970), the first President of Indonesia; Ho Chi Minh (1892-1969) President of North Vietnam; Mao Zedong (1893-1976) the President of the Republic of China; and Kim II-Sung, President of North Korea, were all great men who contributed much to the independence of their peoples after the Second World War but it was the personality cult that kept them in power until their deaths.

It cannot be gainsaid that for a political party to survive it must have loyal members who believe and are dedicated to the party's cause. Nonetheless, a political party must have a leader from time to time. To win and continue in leadership, the leader must have the support of the members.

Supporting a political leader however, should not be confused with personal loyalty to the leader because political support does not translate into personal loyalty which leads to the personality cult.

Margaret Thatcher, Britain's first woman Prime Minister (1979-1990), successfully led her Conservative Party through three consecutive elections but was dumped by her party colleagues as she was going to be a liability at the next general election.

The Conservative Party won that election led by her successor John Major. This is a good example of loyalty to the party as opposed to supporting a leader for so long as the leader is for the good of the party. The party comes first always. Leaders are expendable.

An interesting development at the recently concluded Umno general assembly is the establishment of Putri Umno as a means of injecting fresh blood into the party membership.

Perhaps the party membership should be restructured by not admitting in future to Wanita Umno membership of women below 35 years of age. So too the membership of the main party to men below 40.

The youth wings of the party should be schooled and trained for future leadership by being allocated specific tasks to determine their abilities and commitment to the party.

For example, they could be made responsible for the recruitment of new members and the maintenance of the party's service centres. In addition they should be given the opportunity to serve on the councils of local authorities. Other parties please copy.

Whilst the Umno general assembly was in progress, the MCA was split into

two factions over the issue of whether the party should or should not acquire ownership of two Chinese dailies.

Roadshows were held all over the country led by party leaders, many of whom are in the Government. Rival dinner parties were hosted to draw members to one side or the other.

This was of course in sharp contrast to Umno's ongoing disciplinary action against its own members for hosting dinners to fellow members to win party support which have been classified as money politics. Be that as it may, it has been a long time since there has been a battle royal in the MCA.

Now as if to add more colour to our political scene, a debate has ranged as to who is an Indian. The Indians in the sub-continent consist of many ethnic groups each with its own culture and language. The fact of the matter is that the MIC is dominated by Tamils who constitute the majority of Indian descent in Malaysia.

At the rate the debate is going on there will more political parties in this country with separate political parties for Sikhs, Punjabis, Malayalis, Telegus, Jaffna Tamils, Sinhalese and Pakistanis.

To avoid a proliferation of political parties, perhaps the Barisan Nasional should get on with the proposal to establish the Barisan as a political party so that Malaysians who do not wish to join racial political parties can do so and subscribe to the cause of the Barisan Nasional. The alternative is for such people to join the multi-racial parties of the Opposition.

While the Malays are being shaken to the core by the Umno president, the other races too want to share the limelight. There is never a dull moment in Malaysia.

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