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Open dialogue way to feedback

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A LONG time ago, when the appropriateness of the term "Bumiputera" was still being debated, a young Umno member in Kubang Pasu, Kedah, stood up to ask the Prime Minister if its usage would undermine the Malays' claim to being the natives of the country.

The young member's contention was that while the Malays had been accepted as the natives of the country, the term "Bumiputera", which in Bahasa Malaysia means "sons of the soil", was a recent creation.

He waited in anticipation, believing that he had asked the sharpest question of the day - one that could have cornered the Prime Minister.

The older members, on the other hand, were aghast, thinking that the young man was showing off and, in doing so, had overstepped party decorum.

The Prime Minister stood up and explained to the young man why the term "Bumiputera" was used in the drafting and implementation of the New Economic Policy.

He reminded the young man not to be too dogmatic about race, pointing to the fact that the young man himself traced his ancestry to Turkey. The Prime Minister knew his family well.

Today, nearly two decades later, the term "Bumiputera" is still occasionally debated by Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras alike.

The young man in question is now in his 50s and a senior civil servant. He continues to take a strong interest in politics although his Government job forbids him from being actively involved.

The Prime Minister, who was his divisional Umno chief and Member of Parliament, is on the final lap of his long and often controversial political career. But he is still being asked more or less the same question by other young people.

Despite allegations that he is now less tolerant to criticisms and to pointed questions, the reality is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad remains a good listener and takes criticisms in good spirit.

The problem is, a lot of Umno people, especially those in leadership positions, are prone to making allegations behind his back rather than confronting him with their views.

Some are simply afraid of him. Others believe that they should not ask pointed questions or make controversial statements out of respect for him. As the young man from Kubang Pasu had discovered, to debate with him one must come prepared.

But a lot of ordinary folk and young people love the opportunity to interact with him. They should seize the opportunity to speak frankly and openly to him now that he has embarked on a nationwide tour to meet the rakyat and members of Umno.

Of course not all Umno leaders, including the MPs, State Assemblymen and divisional chiefs, are too happy about these meet-the-people sessions. They are afraid that their shortcomings will be exposed.

The Prime Minister has to be prepared to go over the heads of these officials in order to listen to the rakyat. Orchestration by these people will hide the truth.