

22/05/2001

Opening up Umno to Akar's Chinese members shows Sabah's peculiar politics

Nuraina A. Samad

AT this very moment, many Umno members must be freaking out at the announcement by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that Umno was opening its doors to the Chinese members from the disbanded Parti Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat (Akar) in Sabah.

They are lashing out because they are thinking about the implications of having Chinese members in Umno, a party for the Malays.

Although this is understandable, they should hold their horses and understand that it is just that - Sabah Umno is accepting former Akar members including the Chinese.

Umno may in the future open its doors to all Chinese in Sabah. In fact, the time may come when Umno will be opened to the Chinese in the peninsula as well. But the time certainly is not now. And Dr Mahathir and everyone knows this.

As Dr Mahathir said on Sunday, Sabah is a special case. Umno has been flexible in Sabah to accommodate the Bumiputeras who comprise Muslims and non-Muslims ever since the party decided to expand to this East Malaysian State.

It really is not a big deal. In 1991, the United Sabah National Organisation headed by the late Tun Datu Mustapha, was dissolved and its members, among whom were Chinese, joined Umno.

It is not surprising that many Umno members are not receiving this announcement positively despite the fact that Dr Mahathir has made it clear that the decision is confined to Sabah Umno.

Many probably are looking too much into this decision and thinking about what Umno will look like in the future.

Certainly, Dr Mahathir who is the Prime Minister and Barisan Nasional chairman must explain this to Umno members simply because they deserve to know what this is all about.

They forget that in Sabah, practical decisions have to be made because Sabah has many peculiarities that have made possible the impossible.

The fact that some Umno members have called on Dr Mahathir to "promptly" explain shows that there are many questions they want answered.

Nevertheless, Umno members should accept this decision positively because it is relevant to Sabah's politics.

If Sabah Umno can accept non-Muslim Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputera Muslims, then there is very little reason that it should not accept the Chinese members in Akar.

Dr Mahathir has pointed out that there are not many (former Akar) Chinese members so the decision is purely practical considering that Akar members have joined Umno en bloc and have been accepted.

Moreover, many in the peninsula are not aware of how different the Chinese in Sabah are. Most speak Bahasa Malaysia as if it is their mother tongue and there are many inter-marriages among the Chinese and Bumiputeras.

In the case of Akar, its members are predominantly Bumiputera (Kadazandusun), so it would only be natural for the few Chinese members to join their compatriots in Umno.

To show that it was not unusual, Dr Mahathir drew attention to the Malaysian Thais in Umno in some areas in the peninsula.

Surely, looking at the issue in a broader perspective, it looks like Umno has to start somewhere in efforts towards nation-building and

creating a Bangsa Malaysia. It is a step in the right direction.

It shows Umno's openness and is a sign that Umno is broad-minded. And Sabah is the best place to start, given its peculiarities in terms of Sabah Umno's unconventional composition.

Umno leaders and members should not go overboard in attempting to rationalise Dr Mahathir's intention simply because there is no need to.

They should have confidence in his decision. It is unlikely that Umno will open its membership to the Chinese anytime in the near future because that would be a radical decision that would be detrimental to the party.

There is no reason for such a decision. It is not something that the party leadership would do as a matter of course, at its whim and fancy.

For now, Umno members should rest easy. They do not have to worry about seeing their beloved Umno besieged by the Chinese.

After all, Dr Mahathir did say that such a situation when Umno would be open to all Chinese would only exist when "people are not too conscious about their race".

"At that stage, it is possible," he said. Right now, it is not. It is only a political process taking place in Sabah.

(END)