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Restoring credibility, winning back Malay trust Umno's priority

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THE forthcoming Umno divisional elections next month will be held during a period of much tribulation for Umno as the party is working to restore its former strength.

Already, State Umno leaders as well as the Wanita and Youth chiefs have issued reminder after reminder that whatever plan prospective candidates have in the elections, they must avoid causing fractiousness that can further weaken Umno.

Contests, of course, are good because it means that democracy is still alive in the party. But if they are at a cost during a time when Umno cannot afford further division, then they should be avoided.

Already, several divisions have indicated that the incumbent heads would not be challenged, that a compromise has been reached.

"A sign of maturity," said an Umno member from Kuala Terengganu.

But this question of whether there should be a contest or compromise is not easily answered.

While Umno certainly needs a crop of new leaders who have a vision for the future and who have the enthusiasm to bring Umno through its present struggle to regain its credibility and confidence among the Malays, it does not mean that divisions should do away with their incumbents.

A political commentator said that if challenging the incumbents could deteriorate into factional contests, it was wise under the circumstances not to do so.

"Umno is not as strong as before. Votes have gone to the Opposition. Against the background of the 1999 general election and the fact that Umno is no longer the absolute master of Malay destiny, members should bear in mind the future of the Malays... not just for Umno's sake," he said.

Certainly, young is not equivalent to good. There are young people in Umno who are using the party as a springboard or stepping stone for economic gains.

There are older (division) leaders who are a unifying force whose leadership is relevant and still needed.

These are considerations that are not difficult to think about. Maturity, a love for the party and deep concern for the destiny of the Malays will move members to make that perceived right choice.

"Not that easy, though. Money politics is still something to worry about," said an Umno Youth member.

Umno is loath to admit that some of its leaders indulge in money politics but has been brave enough to admit that they do.

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, at almost every party general assembly, has spoken out against this scourge in Umno.

But will it go away?

"It must...it must be rejected as this is key to Umno's survival," said a political analyst.

He said members must elect incorruptible and honest leaders now.

"It is more important now than at any other time."

An Umno member said that division leaders carried with them much power and influence not only because they "control the branches" but also because they could "bargain with ministers".

"That is why there is a tendency to elect divisional leaders with money," he said.

He admitted it was "very difficult" to wipe out money politics because

there were the givers and takers. He also pointed out that there was a clear difference between accepting funds to run the party machinery and buying votes, although sometimes the line was blurred.

Divisions have always been important because they are a link between the people in the kampung and the leadership. Therefore, division leaders have to be attuned to what the people need.

An Umno veteran lamented the sign of the times as many division leaders now were neither sensitive enough to the needs of the people nor were they dedicated.

"Of course, there are still many honest leaders in Umno. The few corrupt have given a bad name to Umno and the party's image. Still, it is not like the old days when we work for the party and not for ourselves," he said.

This "party-above-self" maxim is what Dr Mahathir and other party leaders have been passionately calling Umno members to practise. This means going back to upholding the party's noble objectives and ideals.

"If you get a lousy and corrupt leader, don't blame the party and its leaders," said a young Umno leader.

But, he pointed out that leaders should also show the way. They should be exemplary, he said.

The next general election promises to be tough for Umno. Some people say that if Umno does not get its act together, winning the Umno States will be a piece of cake for the Opposition.

Many Umno leaders and members are, of course aware of this.

The coming divisional elections should be the real test for Umno which has already taken the crucial step of making amendments to its constitution as part of its objective to reform and strengthen the party.

The criterion now is how to bring about Malay unity and how to inject a new lease of life for Umno.

Umno is facing a credibility crisis among the young generation of Malays as well as the crop of professionals. It has now to convince them that it is a party they can depend on.

Said a political observer: "It must win the confidence of the disenchanted youth, the kampung people and the splintered Malay middle class.

"This is with the 2004 general election in mind. Umno has to win back the Malay middle class, to have their faith and confidence restored in the party.

"They may in 2004 just go back to voting for Umno."

The Malays are watching. They know that the party is under siege, that is bereft of ideas except for a few at the top and that it is still looking for a solution to problems it is facing.

"The party needs leaders who can find ideas to build up the party's waning influence," said an Umno Youth member.

Certainly, in the coming divisional elections, the fate lies in the hands of its members, the very people who can break or make the party.

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