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Re-engineering Umno to reflect society in real time

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WHAT is the politics of a "Re-engineered Umno"? Much of it is delineated in the lengthy speech of Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the 55th Umno General Assembly.

He understands that the restoration of Umno's relevance does not, as mistaken by some well-intentioned souls, lie in destroying, overhauling or changing the party's essential struggles. On the contrary, it lies in pulling Umno out of its intellectual, political and moral muddle.

Umno's success in uplifting the Malays and non-Malays is not at issue. Nor is its success in conceiving a modern nation negated. Rather it is this intellectual, political and moral muddle that led to Umno's perceived irrelevance and the troubled Malay political landscape.

Needless to say, it is a muddle that saw the betrayal of the party's core struggles, oblivion of past achievements and obfuscation of its validity and primacy as the party for the Malays.

There are many reasons for it. But mainly the perception that the pursuit of the moneyed life is the commanding value in the party saw it losing affection and touch with the traditional base in rural areas and the working class in the urban areas.

Again, many reasons would contribute to this. But overall, it might be said that Umno (read the Malays) is afflicted with the end-of-political-ideology syndrome, to use the words of leading critic of modern American consciousness C. Wright Mills.

End-of-ideology is the ending of political reflection as a public mission and thus the people's lack of empathy and identification with the party. It is a posture of know-it-all, seen-it-all, been-through-it-all justifications and a delusion of standing tall as an equal to the other political and economic class, a false sense of accomplishment and satisfaction by the pursuit of power as a means to easy wealth and estate-building.

The syndrome is an ideology of political complacency where the purpose is to acquiesce to and justify the status quo. Rightly or wrongly, the party has been identified as a passport to easy wealth, particularly the non-productive kind which involves the "sale" of permits and licences. Even if some enterprise is involved, the management is usually left to non-Bumiputera partners.

The end-of-ideology is the end of imagination in a party that has been very successful in charting the path of nationhood. On a day-to-day basis, the young see no new political vocabulary in the party - one that is up-to-date with events, problems and structure of today's life.

Anything that stirs them comes in the form of a once-a-year affair when party stalwarts like Dr Mahathir and his deputy say something illuminating. But the follow-up to that is almost absent.

Alas, the impressionistic observations of the young, eager to contribute and participate, are hardly flattering on party members: The only real thinker in the party are a few elders like Dr Mahathir and worse, the rest who follow do not rouse themselves into action to work out the supplementary party themes, strategies and navigating skills to answer varying societal demands. They do not see how their upsurge of political energy can be met in this perceived condition. The political psychology of the young is poorly understood by the party.

The party's power to outrage (scaling the Chinese Assembly Hall to

showcase the power of Tuan Muda, as cynically described by a Chinese reader to a Malay daily, does not stir the power of imagination for a higher and noble cause); to make sense of global developments, to enlighten and clarify events are blunted by this complacency.

We have no right to blame the young if they don't understand the historical import of the past. Blame the elders and those in their 30-somethings and up, who saw affluence as a right owed to them by the party and who fail to analyse and connect the present to the lessons of the past. Blame the naive celebrants of complacency inside and outside the party who abdicate their will to make the Malays a high-achieving and independent society.

And so should we blame the post-modernity children if they look beyond Umno for a new rhetoric, new image and new political identity? Blair has his Third Way, Clinton had his New Democrat and Bush his Compassionate Conservatives. But Umno?

Still, there is hope yet. Carefully analysed and distilled, Dr Mahathir's stinging speech contains gems of rousing ideas and rallying calls that can be converted into a platform for an Umno Rebuilt, Umno Rejuvenated, Umno Re-engineered. In other words, a new face of Umno.

Based on the gist of Dr Mahathir's speech, it would be an Umno that fights inter alia against financial-industrial dependence, multinational-dependence, foreign-oriented dependence, knowledge dependence and technological dependence. No doubt, its essential struggle for true independence remains, but it assumes new forms.

It will have to free the country from dependent capitalism that prevents us all from reaching a nationally and internationally competitive situation. It has to liberate the nation from dependent democracy that sees the love affair with made-in-USA liberal ideas and a wholesale import of value orientations from the West.

Nevertheless, a new face of Umno must give room for new energy and dynamism from new people. Malays are, be they members of opposition parties or mere non-partisan spectators, stakeholders in the efforts to turn the community into a truly independent, progressive, enlightened and high-achieving society. The question is: Will a re-engineered Umno have the capacity, resources, intellectual and moral stamina to achieve all these?

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