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The challenges after 55 years

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PICTURES of pre-independence politicians giving fiery anti-colonial speeches in villages surrounded by rubber plantations can warm the hearts of many, especially the romantics.

A gem would indeed be the one which had Datuk Onn Jaafar cycling to remote places in Johor, part of his journey in setting up Umno and fighting for the nation's independence.

Then there are those photographs of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra declaring "Merdeka" and, later on, his trips to the various parts of Malaya and the Borneo States to pursue the formation of Malaysia.

Nowadays, bicycles are mostly for sports or schoolchildren. Many rubber plantations have been replaced with massive buildings while those in existence are travelled within by motorised vehicles.

If the yardstick of success is to be based on structural changes, Umno has contributed much to it.

If it is based on improved living standards compared with the early years, Umno can go strutting about it.

Indeed, since the formative years of Umno in 1946 through independence, it has provided the leadership, first with the Alliance and now the Barisan Nasional, in shaping the nation.

It has the right to stake its claim to the progression of the nation, from an agricultural backwater into a regional industrialised powerhouse.

The evolution of the nation is consistent with the path journeyed by the Umno leadership.

Take Datuk Onn for example - the man who worked hard on the idea to unite Malay organisations under one umbrella, Umno, and the one who sparked the idea of an independent Malaya.

Tunku, who took over, concluded the task and rightly deserved the Bapak Kemerdekaan tag.

But his successor, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, had a different role as the nation's struggle had taken on a newer dimension.

With the rule of the country firmly in the hands of Malaysians, it was time to enjoy the fruits of the labour.

Razak laid the foundations for economic opportunities and, at that stage, agriculture and natural resources were the backbone.

His successor, Tun Hussein Onn, pursued Razak's efforts further and by the time Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took over, things had indeed changed for the nation.

No longer could the nation be dependent on its natural resources entirely and Malaysia embarked on heavy industries, apart from becoming an aggressive player in multi-lateral trading.

Umno, and the rest of the nation too, changed. From a rural Malay entity, it became more urbane and sophisticated.

Its struggle took a major leap forward.

If it started as the frontliner in breaking the shackles of colonialism, then defending the freedom and inevitably consolidating its ranks, the 1980s were definitely a time when the party took a different dimension.

It was a period to pursue success and to enjoy the benefits which came from the struggles of the founding fathers.

Success came like a rush and that, too, is something Umno can claim to have a major hand.

But wealth and material inevitably became the yardstick of social

status.

And both can be obtained not only through hard work but also, or especially, power.

It was during this stage, when Umno and the rest of the nation were swimming in the success, that the money politics hydra spread its tentacles on the party.

There was no real sense of responsibilities. The country was doing well, threats of neo-colonialism were perceived as mere paranoia and the only struggle some of the new Umno people were caught in was how to secure positions.

With that, money is used to get power which, in turn, begets more money.

The 1993 party elections saw the use of money reaching a nauseating level that the party elders had to convene a special general assembly the following year merely to address the cancerous disease.

It has not stopped as the recent party divisional elections showed.

To quote Dr Mahathir:

"I have pleaded, threatened and cried, but it does not seem to take effect."

Such is the frustration faced by the party president that he seemed to be at a loss to get party members to stop the practice of money politics.

And that is actually the main threat faced by Umno as it reached its 55th year of existence.

The party elders of today are trying to get members to go back to the basics, which in short means re-discovering the values of the struggles of the past.

The Umno leadership realises that the party has come through a full circle of existence and it is finally able to look around proudly at the success enjoyed by the nation.

But it is the very success which it had fought and struggled so hard for that seems to be eating it up now.

It is no longer about pursuing success for Umno of today. It is about managing success.

If it can't deal with that, the success it achieved should be read as its failure.

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