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The winds of change have set in

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POLITICS, like sport, is a great way of bringing people together. I am talking in particular about committed Umno delegates, members and supporters, and even curious non-members, who were at Umno's 55th annual general assembly last week.

The top hats and delegates strove hard to inject new fervour and realism into the party. We will see the result as it claws its way back to being what it once was.

Really, the answer to the fears of future electoral reverses lies, I think, in reform of our democracy and in an Umno which can capture the imagination of the young Bumiputeras, its ability to attract them on board.

To be fair, Umno has taken its first, slow step with the formation of Puteri Umno. Now, stop whingeing and apportioning blame on the Opposition, its job is to find fault, everything and nothing.

Instead, direct the party's and government's efforts to thinking and implementing constitutional reform, determining the future of politics and snuffing out the increasingly aggressive manifestation of racial polarisation and religious intolerance and extremism.

I could see, unless there is reform, three sets of Malaysians eventually clashing and mortally; those whose overriding priority has always been the latter day Malayan Union (Malaysian Malaysia) - they want the present set-up abolished - and the Islamists in Pas who have always wished to wreak vengeance on Umno (to form a purist Wahabi-type or Iran-style Islamic state), and the third group, the present ruling politicians.

There are still many supporters of the Middle Way, but most of them, I suppose, are deceiving themselves as to their true motives and inclinations. But, being pragmatic, they remain and will always be supportive, like it or not, of the corps that is in Putrajaya.

It was a good weekend for me. My youngest son is back from London. Just as when I think I am free to party all week, I remember that this column and others need writing.

The winds of change are blowing through Umno whether dissidents like it or not; the growth of Puteri Umno is a political fact.

As with most changes, like the formation of Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963, it was not a propitious beginning for Puteri Umno because from the start it faced protracted opposition from some quarters.

Nothing is more changeable than the direction of the wind: I am happy that it has followed the right course.

My use of the metaphor (first used by Harold Macmillan in an address to the apartheid South African Parliament on 4 February 1960) is deliberate, and I believe, insofar as Umno is concerned, very apt.

Macmillan was describing the political situation in South Africa then.

Jawaharlal Nehru once spoke about strong winds blowing all over Asia and within a decade of his speech, Ghana first and then we became independent in 1957.

I am particularly glad that at long last, there is an infusion of, even indirectly, fresh blood in Umno's most influential, redoubtable and efficient wing though it was achieved not easily. Indeed, in a rather tortuous way.

Having said, done and reported about Puteri Umno, I hope it will move on to enthuse young Bumiputera girls and women into joining the Puteri to

bring changes with the co-operation, preferably, of the senior, well-tested and effective Wanita Umno.

Both groups do present an intriguing paradox of a sort. The Wanita Umno has always been, in what it does, characterised by refined Malay restraint.

On the other hand, Puteri Umno is seen as the source which will reflect the young Bumiputera ladies' ethos, elan and psyche.

Of course, Puteri Umno is not the Malay cultural specific like their elder sisters, mothers and grandmothers.

There is another Malay cultural specific, internationally known, which I would like to bring to your notice: amok.

Malays run amok only, and only, when their backs are pushed up to the wall which means when their identity, language, religion and power are threatened by forces which want to dominate or replace their culture and politics with theirs.

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, I think, made an oblique reference during the weekend to the dangers of one group playing racial politics at the expense of the majority and definitive race.

Racism is obnoxious. The presumption that some races are inherently superior to others is offensive. It was first directed against the Jews; now that they are powerful, racism has become the savage practice among the hawkish and ultra-Israeli nationalists.

Race, like religion, has now become a rallying force against whoever that race is against.

Puteri Umno and Wanita Umno, not surprisingly, received respectable media coverage during the Umno general assembly. Azalina Othman Said, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman are the best known Wanita politicians just now.

Puteri Umno's presence, a first, in Dewan Merdeka at the Putra World Trade Centre, was symbolic and yet well-noted and strongly felt. Puteri Umno will be officially inaugurated in early August.

The Umno leadership realises that continued Umno-Malay power can only be guaranteed by the young generation of Bumiputera youth, young women in particular.

Even Pas has, though reluctantly, recognised this and is changing, striving to appear less anti-women, progress and enlightenment.

In the next general election, Umno will need every ounce of assistance from Wanita, Puteri Umno, Pemuda and other members and more importantly, all those Malays and non-Malays who subscribe to entrenching Malaysia as it is now, not an Islamic theocratic state as desired by Pas, Keadilan and Partai Rakyat, Pas' staunch allies.

DAP appears to be having afterthoughts about its continued association with Pas, which is not unnaturally bent on jihad and the propagation of Islamic political doctrine.

I know the three leaders: Azalina, Rafidah and Zaharah. Each has her strengths and weaknesses; however, they generally accept the Umno - Dr Mahathir - Malay world view.

The party needs all three though it will be wishful thinking to expect them to embrace each other even unpassionately.

They will work for Umno, yet maintain intense personal rivalry. The one to watch in the next three years is Azalina, a practising lawyer.

If Umno reconnects with the people, gets rid of the corrupt, the incompetent, the debauchees and deadwood, I am confident the voters who deserted Umno in the last general election will return to the fold and give the party a bigger triumph in the next general election, expected to be in 2003 or 2004. However, seeing is believing.

I shall not use the phrase movers and shakers because it's sometimes

used rather indiscriminately, and often directed with a faint note of derision at those who believe themselves to be powerful or influential. However, Azalina will continue to make waves in Umno politics for a while to come.

Islamic fervour has been escalating as the Malays become disenchanted. The battle has narrowed down to a do-or-die contest between the well-tested middle-of-the-road Umno and the ultra-conservative Pas.

Pas, led by Iran-type clerics, has been fighting since 1951 to "cleanse" this nation.

Puteri, Wanita, and Pemuda Umno (the last two, I hope, will be reinvigorated soon) will be in the forefront of this gripping, life-and-death struggle to determine in the coming years whether modern Malaysia lives or dies. Malaysian women will decide for whom the bell tolls.

As Wordsworth states, every poem describes as seeing "into the heart of things", young Malaysians in 2003-4 and thereafter will be the group that will spice and provide the balm for the beleaguered soul of Malaysia.

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