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The unfinished struggle

AS witnessed in its 55th general assembly, Umno has begun its march to renewal. Its president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has provided a framework in which the party can, once again, re-establish itself as a creative ideological force to lead the Malays and ultimately, the nation.

True to his stature as the ideological architect of the party, community and the country, Dr Mahathir's opening and closing speeches contain various ideas and analyses by which the party can posit, explain and justify ends and means of social, economic and political actions for the advancement of the Malays.

Doubtless, this is an important dimension in the efforts to fortify the party and restore its relevance. Umno, in its early years, was able to push itself to the forefront of Malaysia's political stage because of its capacity to inspire confidence and its capacity to lead the people and govern the country.

But this ability appears to be eroded by a seemingly sapped political drive and ideological self-confidence - an inner crisis which was not cogently deciphered and challenged prior to the assembly. The disunity in the community, caused by the distortion and exploitation of issues and religion, reinforces the perception that Umno is in decline. Evidently, Dr Mahathir knows that the Rip Van Winkles in the party cannot be woken up with a mere nudge nor can the decline be arrested in an ideological vacuum.

And rightly so. Issues and ideological contours have changed. The party must be innovative and attain an original political synthesis that cannot be reduced to the old framework of thought. The essential struggles remain but they should be articulated and fought for in a new and publicly relevant framework.

If there seemed to be an absence of issues, it was because the imagination and complete concurrence of the densely packed Merdeka Hall were captured not by any display of fiery rhetoric but by Dr Mahathir's candour and commonsense. He put forward the plight of the Malays with devastating clearness and with equal clarity, he proposed the prescriptions for their maladies. Foremost is the need for unity. Recent events show that certain quarters had taken advantage of the climate of political uncertainty and Malay disunity to force their narrow and partisan concerns to the forefront of public debate.

Dr Mahathir has shown the way forward for Umno to find electoral sustenance; reduce the potential for party conflict; provide an ideological framework that retains the past, present and future as a guiding force; end disillusionment; and purge off the elements that can wreck it since the moral qualities of men and institution reflect on each other. It must be a strenuous opponent of money politics, hollow aspirations, empty promises, foolish vanity and extremism.

History has shown that many are betrayed by what is false within them. Umno's soul-searching should not end here. To re-earn its place in the Malays' hearts, it must re-assert an aggressive, transparent and ethical approach to political life.

All these were powerfully articulated by Dr Mahathir. We hope they are not forgotten but etched permanently in the party's collective consciousness and action. We shall see whether hell hath no greater fury

than a party bent on reviving itself as a dominant political force.
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