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To contest or not to contest poser at Umno divisional meetings

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UMNO members going to Mecca for their pilgrimage should now be able to perform their haj peacefully.

After all, the supreme council has given the assurance that branches having members performing the haj can postpone their meetings until the members return.

Originally, the Umno supreme council had set aside the whole month of March for some 18,000 branches to hold their annual general meeting while April was for all 165 divisions to conclude theirs.

However, given the fact that the first batch of pilgrims are scheduled to leave for Mecca on Jan 27 and the last batch to return on April 9, the supreme council had to allow for flexibility in terms of the dates for the meetings to be concluded.

For the supreme council to make such a concession meant that there are quite a large number of its members going for the haj who in turn would have made an appeal for it.

There is something poignant about all this.

For one, these members are eager to perform their religious obligations, despite the negative remarks made about the religious convictions of Umno members.

On that score, they seem to be as aware of their religious obligations as those who viewed them condescendingly.

Then there is this request that the members had forwarded to their top leaders - to relax the timeframe for the branch to hold their meetings.

In short, they are also committed to their worldly affairs and would want to be able to pursue their rights and participate fully in the party's affairs.

As such, in their religious pursuits, they have not forgotten their responsibilities in matters concerning the Malays and Bumiputera.

At the same time, there is an ironic twist to all this.

When the Umno members return from their pilgrimage to participate in the branch meetings and especially in the divisional elections, they will inevitably be exposed to the "sins" which had been haunting Umno in recent years.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had during the Umno general assembly on Nov 19 last year said:

"I have persuaded, I have pleaded, I have cried and I have prayed."

These are reflections of his frustrations in the continuing practice of money politics in party elections at all levels and the coming divisional elections cannot be expected to be any different.

The fact remains, however, that most Umno members have performed the pilgrimage, a process to cleanse one's soul of sins past.

On their return from the Holy Land, they are expected to have the inner strength to avert any temptation to commit similar sins.

Many Umno members have gone for the haj - some more than once.

While it is unfair to accuse these Umno hajis as practitioners of money politics, it should be incumbent upon them to stop others from indulging in it.

Otherwise in the next Umno general assembly, Dr Mahathir will again have to make another appeal to members to put a stop to the practice of money politics which, whether party members like it or not, had contributed to the weakening of the party.

This is, however, left to one's conscience.

At the same time, these reports about Umno members going on the pilgrimage also served to contradict the many accusations levelled at them.

One of it is having to contend with the on-going taunting by Malay Muslims belonging to the other side of the Malay political divide that Umno members are "lesser" Muslims.

For the accusers, their conscience too should be their guide.

But back to the April divisional elections, the grassroots members seem to have shifted into higher gear.

While there are many who want to see contests for top divisional posts, there are others who seem to want to avoid them.

Those for contests believe that too many elections had passed in which compromises and no-contest resolutions were taken in the name of unity.

To them, not allowing contests would not be healthy for the party as it would blunt the process of rejuvenation which would bring in new blood and remove deadwood.

Surely, grassroots party members are responsible enough to vote in new faces who they believe have the ability to lead and rejuvenate their divisions.

On the other hand, those who do not believe there should be any contests are of the opinion that contests will further fragment the divisions - given the fact that the party had been badly hit since the last general election.

To them, smooth changes - to be read as compromises and negotiated changes - would be the better way of doing things.

They too believe that contests will only further encourage money politics.

These may be applicable to responsible and conscientious divisional leaders; but many too would want to take advantage of the no-contest promo to hold on to power though they had excess baggage.

It all sounds very convoluted and had reached a stage of "damned if they do and damned if they don't".

But if there is any yardstick that the Umno members can use in deciding how they should deal with the coming divisional elections, the past ones since 1996 can help enlighten them.

That was the year when the idea of no-contest was being promoted until it became trendy of late.

Money politics has not ceased and neither has the party been greatly rejuvenated.

As such, they should take chances and opt for contests.

They have nothing more to lose and it could very well be the answer to the party's lacklustreness.

The rest is matters of conscience.

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