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Umno re-engineers to remain relevant

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FOR those who had expected to see major changes in Umno divisional leadership, the outcome of the contests which ended a few days ago must have been somewhat encouraging.

A few may even be disappointed, but there is enough signs to show that the party is bracing itself for a major contest in the next general election, which is scheduled on or before 2004.

Of the 161 candidates, 37 are new faces, heading the divisions for the 2001-2003 period. The rest were incumbents, who were returned unopposed. Despite the advice to avoid contest for positions, party members had their own opinion and this was manifested in the 37 divisions.

Umno realised that it has to make changes if it wishes to remain relevant. In fact, the Government, of which Umno is the dominant party, had actually initiated some changes over the years.

In the Cabinet, for example, the changes following the 1999 general election could be seen as a shift involving many Umno leaders.

Except for International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself, members representing Umno were moved, particularly those in sensitive or vital portfolios which involve the masses.

The changes were not confined to Umno Cabinet members alone. For instance, the country now has a very innovative manager in the Agriculture Ministry in the person of Datuk Dr Affendi Norwawi. The Agriculture Minister has been coming up with all sorts of ideas and innovations.

Then there is Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Muhammad.

The man may not be very prominent, yet he has been able to propose to the Umno supreme council that the education system be reviewed. The Prime Minister then issued a statement to that effect. His appointment was also seen as a move to de-politicise the ministry.

A new ministry was also formed. Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil was made Women and Family Development Minister and is one of the new faces contributing to the transformation in the Cabinet.

Changes at the State level are even more distinct.

Among the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers, only one, Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad, was retained.

"To me these are nothing short of revolutionary, something the majority of the people had failed to notice," says Datuk Hassan Harun, chairman and chief executive officer of KUB Malaysia Berhad.

Hassan is one of the elected members of the Umno supreme council and is involved in some of the re-engineering in the party.

Dr Mahathir's open admission (to the media and in Umno general assemblies) of the existence of money politics in the ruling party was something new in the country's political scene.

"I thought it would be damaging to the image of Umno, but Dr Mahathir had another agenda of wanting to get rid of those who indulged in money politics." Consequently many of these people were, in Hassan's own word "eliminated".

Money politics has been in existence for a while, and in varying degrees. An open admission by the party president signalled the end of the denial syndrome which had plagued the party for years.

Recent recommendations by the party disciplinary committee, which led to the suspension of six officials said to be guilty of money politics and

abuse of power, is testimony of the seriousness with which the party goes about in wanting to transform itself.

The re-engineering within Umno continues. The approval, and the announcement recently of the Putri Umno pro-tem committee, is yet another move to regain the people's confidence.

If Umno members and watchers were to pause for a minute, they would be able to see that these changes, or the groundwork for more changes, were executed only in 18 months.

As if that was not enough, the country also saw changes taking place in the civil service. The Umno-led Government was serious in wanting to restore public confidence in itself. Results of the 1999 election, which saw Umno losing some seats and a state to the opposition, had triggered a fresh look at the national administration.

Umno was anxious to make changes within itself and the Government it leads.

The Employees Provident Fund, the Economic Planning Unit, the Public Services Department, lord president, the attorney-general, solicitor general, Bank Negara governor, the Anti-Corruption Agency...all these getting new people at the helm, to name a few.

In fact, in the past 18 months, many Government departments went through some sort of changes one way or another. These kind of changes, happening in such a short period of time, should be seen as reforms undertaken with a view to make the administration more efficient, effective and a greater sense of transparency and accountability.

Perhaps, as pointed out by Hassan, the only reason the masses had failed to notice them was due to the way they were carried out -quietly and with the minimum of fuss.

It is worth mentioning that in the past financial-related bodies, such as the Economic Planning Unit and Bank Negara, were managed by accountants. Now they are headed by economists, who speak the same language.

Of course, changes like these are not made on an ad-hoc manner, or on the spur of the moment. They were well thought-out, done precisely and with a clear sense of purpose. It was not all PR (public relations), as some would say.

The changes in the agencies were systematically followed by the setting up of Mapen 2 and the launching of the Third Outlook Perspective Plan (OPP3), the Eighth Malaysia Plan, the industrial sector master plan, financial sector masterplan and the additional guidelines on corporate governance.

"As a corporate person, I could feel it. It's the beginning of a great revolution. And there's talk of reviews of laws which many find objectionable..." Hassan says.

Umno, through the Government, seems bent on wanting to make a difference. No longer was it willing to sweep problems under the carpet, or give scant notices to the people's daily problems (not that these were the order of the day then).

The most recent, for example, was the manner the Government showed its conviction in tackling the flood - the worst in 31 years - that hit Kuala Lumpur, killing two persons and causing hundreds of vehicles to be stranded.

The Prime Minister came forward and admitted that something was very wrong in the planning of development. He then issued fresh instructions and demanded that a detailed masterplan be produced quickly.

To the Opposition, perhaps these are not changes, let alone reforms. To them there is only one change that can be described as major - Dr Mahathir's retirement.

The Prime Minister himself had pointed out that he would pass on the baton to his successor when the time comes, but the Opposition is anxious that Dr Mahathir retreat as soon as possible.

But a question was asked: what would Malaysia without Dr Mahathir be? Academicians like Professor Datuk Firdaus Abdullah, head of Students Affairs Universiti Malaya, prefer to look at the realities rather than engage in trips of fantasy.

To him, Dr Mahathir, as a human being, is certainly by no means perfect and the Prime Minister himself realises this.

The last sentence of Dr Mahathir's statement when introducing the Vision 2020 clearly indicates his pragmatism.

The Prime Minister had said that no formula was perfect, but the most imperfect formula was the formula that was not implemented at all.

Dr Mahathir, he says, has the resilience, strategy, vision, wit and the ability as a political strategist to make things move. "Many leaders have visions, but I have yet to find a leader like Dr Mahathir who has a vision and knows how to articulate it with gallantry."

It is not unusual for the Government, under the democratic system, be confronted with all kinds of criticisms and contradicting demands. Despite what the Opposition says, today's Government is still the best, says Prof Firdaus, repeatedly insisting that he is not apologising for sounding like a fan of Dr Mahathir.

The academician said some people run the Prime Minister down, forgetting the fact that today's Government under Dr Mahathir is the best available so far.

William Shakespeare had said: "Heavy is the head that wears the crown." Malay has its equivalent: berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul (Heavy may be the eyes that see, it is even heavier for the shoulder that carries)

"They think Dr Mahathir has the magic lamp and can deliver anything they want overnight."

Naturally, criticisms on the introduction and formulation of the various policies such as the 8th plan, the OPP3 and Vision 2020 were not unexpected. "These are not perfect too, in the sense that they will not satisfy everybody, but the fact remains that they are certainly done in good faith, have succeeded and will continue to bear fruits."

Dr Mahathir's decision on the currency control measures in 1998 was seen as something drastic.

"Fundamentally it was revolutionary. He managed to argue and articulate his way until all those who were against his style and policy agreed with him in the end. Even the International Monetary Fund later could not fault what Dr Mahathir had done." says Hassan.

It was from there he started organising massive changes. The 1999 general election, where allegations of widespread corruption and cronyism were levelled against the Government, triggered more reforms in the year or so.

"Even programmes undertaken to help the Malays were labelled as cronyism, (but) he took the challenge openly," Hassan said.

Hassan is convinced that with all the moves that Dr Mahathir has been taking in the past several months, the Prime Minister has regained his political will to continue. Equally important, the changes he had initiated would make Umno, and the Government, continue to be relevant provided they are fully supported and implemented without fear or favour.

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