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Umno's new wave: The Puteri

Abdullah Ahmad

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 16 September 1963, it was not a propitious beginning for Puteri Umno because from the start it faced a 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, in so far 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 in which to reflect 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 about the danger 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 who-ever 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 of 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 have an after-thought 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, get rid of the corrupt, incompetent, debauchee 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.

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