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When aging is not coming of age

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IT HAS been decided that the age limit of the Puteri Umno chief is 35, the same as its members.

That should be fine as it is a true reflection of what the word Puteri means in the context of the political movement, youngish and yet to be perceived as a mak cik.

But the rule does not apply for the Umno Youth chief in which there is no age limit for any party member to assume the post.

While to remain in the movement and assume other posts, the age limit is set at 40 but the chief is an exception.

Quite a gender-biased policy against the fairer sex but it can also be viewed from another perspective in which, the party leadership may want to contain the youthful exuberance of the Umno Youth members with more mature and less temperamental leaders.

This point had been brought up by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad some three months ago when talking about the leadership tussle in the MAYC youth organisation.

His remarks about the struggle for leadership was quite scathing, in which, he said the youth movement should be led by the youth.

While Dr Mahathir's observation and remark may be taken as a one-off thing, the essence of it should make it clear to the practitioners who refused to let go their position in the youth movements despite having reached the zenith of their existence.

While the MAYC remains in the hands of those not so youthful anymore, some of the student movements in the nation are also still caught in similar trappings.

The Peninsular Malay Students Federation in Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim, too, have someone who does not seem "studently" enough to be its president.

Much as it may have been a trend among youth organisations and student bodies to have individuals who do not actually represent their raison d'etre, it is not something that should be allowed to continue.

Take Suhaimi for example.

When he decided to criticise Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein for making a generalised statement that most student leaders from local universities are anti-Government, Suhaimi did not come across as the voice of the students but more of a politician.

Suhaimi may have a point when he argued that remarks such as that coming from Hishamuddin could leave a negative effect on student leaders and society.

Accusing Hishamuddin as making baseless accusations, Suhaimi further argued that such remarks would convince society of student leaders as anti-Government.

Whereas, he further contended, there had been signs that the student leaders were prepared to meet, discuss and hold dialogues on the nation's leadership, international and contemporary issues.

Suhaimi's remarks are definitely those of a populist and deviating from the original issue of whether the majority of the student leaders in local universities are anti-Government or not.

Reactions from the International Islamic University student council president Ahmad Fadzli Yusof was more reflective of a university student when replying to Hishamuddin.

While transparently diplomatic when he said that the students were only

criticising Government policies which they deemed against the interest of society, the next sentence was very pertinent.

"The attitude of the Government of not being sensitive to the voice of the students before this has made us to lean more towards the opposition," he pointed out.

In short, there is an admittance that quite a number of local university student leaders are anti-Government or pro-opposition, whichever one prefers.

Universiti Teknologi Mara student council president Nazrul Fazami was more forthcoming, admitting that some student leaders were influenced by the opposition propaganda.

Speaking to a student leader who supports the present Government, he claimed that most of the established universities (to be read traditional ones) are controlled by those who are pro-opposition.

He pointed out that the problem was not something new.

"The seeds had been planted for a long time ... the opposition parties had been working on the cadre system and had been active in getting close to potential student leaders.

"In fact, the cycle of the cadre system had now reached the level where the students who were pro-opposition had now become lecturers and they, now in turn, are recruiting potential student leaders into their fold," he added.

This student leader also revealed that opposition party leaders had been active in assisting student leaders who are in their fold in campus elections.

It is not a new phenomenon if students are anti-Government.

In fact, that had always been the way in the past in which, it is actually quite trendy to be against the establishment.

But that did not make them pro-opposition.

The difference now is that, apart from being anti-Government, quite a number are pro-opposition.

That too is not something extraordinary especially in Malaysia where democracy, though perceived to be in its infancy by its foreign critics, had allowed such choices among the students.

As such, student leaders should also not get all worked up with Hishamuddin's criticisms as he was merely exercising his democratic right and at the same time, there is a lot of truth to it.

While Suhaimi may want to get into the fray, the fact remains - the criticisms from Hishamuddin are merely thoughts of a politician who may feel the desperation of trying to swing things his way.

For the students, it is their conscience to guide them as they embark on the journey of being the moral guardian of society and the watchdog of the government.

But that can only be achieved if they choose to take the middle path.

Taking sides merely alienate part of the society which may belong on the other side of the political divide.

If they realise this, then, the student leaders will truly come of age.

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