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Downside of Umno's changing role

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Umno may be facing the downside of more than 50 years of helping the Malays with its changing role from spearheading advancement to sheltering and protecting the community.

New Straits Times Group Editor-in-Chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad said this may have worked against the interests of the Malays if the community saw Umno as the only way to progress.

"This (policy) may have gone too far if Umno is now in danger of being the last resort for those Malays incapable, or more likely, unwilling to work hard in making the most of advantages and benefits they have been given," he told Fulbright-Hays visiting scholars today.

In his talk themed The Role of Umno in Malaysia's Parliamentary System, Abdullah said this would be a tragic irony as Umno had come into existence because of the demands of the Malays for the right to exist in dignity in their own nation.

The former Malaysian special envoy to the UN said despite its numerous plus points, this was one of two basic shortcomings of the social contract crafted by the founding fathers of the Alliance, which won the first general election in 1955.

The contract, he said, remained as valid, effective and popular today as it did at its inception.

The other shortcoming was that the Barisan Nasional's structure provided little scope for the development of a-racialist politics like that dreamt of by Umno founder Datuk Onn Jaafar.

However, multi-racialism had been infused as a societal ideal into all components of the ruling party and most of the opposition, he added.

Malaysian political parties, he said, had evolved multi-racial mindsets, even if their constitutions continued to specify racial exclusivity in their own identities.

Lamenting that some moderate Malays stayed out of politics, he said it was ironic as they had benefited the most from Umno's struggle.

"So this is another instance of Umno's success being, in a way, not a reward but a punishment," he said, adding that moderate Malays should be the best argument against Pas.

Abdullah said the nation owed a debt of gratitude to Umno as "without Umno, God knows what we would be today: perhaps someone else's province, or vassal, or dependent territory".

Umno, as the pre-eminent BN partner, was being shaped by the nation with the constantly reinforcing process keeping the party relevant.

"Party political leaders will come and go, rise and fall. But the process and the party will endure."

He cited the party's ability to adapt to Prime Minister and party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's decision to resign and then retract it as an example of its strength.

Earlier, outlining Umno's history, he said efforts by Onn to have the party represent all Malaysians failed as the non-Malays were a long way from regarding Malaya as their home.

On the Pan Malayan Islamic Party, the pre-cursor to Pas which won the only seat against the Alliance in 1955, he said the British did not outlaw it as they may have felt the Alliance's overwhelming popularity was not a good thing in a multi-party system and colonialism.

History, he said, was repeating itself as Pas is today the principal

Malay opposition to Umno which remained the lynchpin of the BN.