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Princesses take centre court

Abdullah Ahmad

MALAY women have never been historically secluded or banned, unlike their sisters in the ultra-conservative Arab nations, from the public arena. Attempts are being made by unenlightened Islamists to change the situation to turn them into Arab women.

In 1945 the British Government surreptitiously forced the Malayan Union on the Malays, making their nation a centralised, united colony where the Sultans were reduced to the status of kadi, their state governments to provincial administrations and the non-Malays were to have equal rights with the Malays; it seemed like a *fait accompli* and a *coup de grace*.

Malay women joined their fathers and husbands to protest against the British diktat.

In April 1946, the British Military Administration handed over to Sir Edward Gent, the new governor of the Malayan Union, and every Sultan, politician and ordinary Malay boycotted his installation.

Against the popular Malay opposition led by Umno (formed in May) the British abandoned the Malayan Union and replaced it with the Federation of Malaya which became independent in 1957 and was enlarged to become Malaysia in 1963.

Women's participation - never thought possible by the British because they always underestimated the Malays - contributed much to the present Malaysian political landscape.

Until the formation of Puteri Umno, young Malay women were quite indifferent to politics. But since then, if you are politically smart, you should not only re-imagine Malay women but re-think the entire Malaysian political landscape.

I supported Puteri Umno's creation in the pages of this and other newspapers because I believe, in the long run, they have the chance to revolutionise Malaysian political life more than you might dare to imagine.

I have, over the years, observed one big difference between men and women: women turn out to vote in greater numbers, and are thus more decisive in electoral outcomes.

The role of women in Umno has been incalculable, right from the start. In kampung and rural life, women cement the community much more than men do. While the men of Umno took to the rough work of sowing and reaping support, it was the women who, in the red sarong and white baju kurong of the Wanita Umno, put the harvest on the table.

As in all traditional societies, they did it behind the scenes, without having to take so much as a step outside of their domesticities. If victorious nations commemorate selfless sacrifice and nameless courage by erecting statues of the Unknown Soldier, then Umno has more than enough cause to make a monument out of the Unknown Kaum Ibu (Wanita Umno's precursor)!

That was why Wanita Umno at first strenuously resisted the formation of Puteri Umno before eventually embracing the daughters. Of course, the new wing's proponents, chief among whom was party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, never intended to devalue Wanita's role. On the contrary, they wanted to enhance the participation of women in the political process.

They had another, and far more important, consideration in mind: demographics and what pollsters and political mavens in developed countries

would call a "youth bulge", or the disproportionately large vote bloc occupied by the urbanised young.

I have said this often enough: Umno's future now depends on the young much more than it has ever done before. Engaging and enlisting youth is a critical issue for all democratic political parties that had been founded on the ideals of the last century or earlier.

Umno is not alone. Take Britain's Conservative Party (average age 65), for example. In 1998, it abolished its youth wing, the Young Conservatives, which had been around since the 1940s, in favour of a new organisation called the "Conservative Future". The Young Conservatives had been led by a group of right-wing nutters and had seen membership decline from 250,000 to about 3,000.

Radicalism, a carry-over from the 1960s, had similarly infected the British Labour Party, whose unwashed youth had called themselves the Militant Tendency, no less. Party leader Neil Kinnock had to fight them tooth and nail in the 1980s in his efforts to make Labour electable again.

Umno had the same problem with a presumptuous Umno Youth, up to the 1970s. It had been used as a springboard by the impatient political warlord, Datuk Harun Idris, to ambush the party centre.

Umno Youth has since been better integrated into the senior party, upon whom its callow activism as an internal "pressure group" did more harm than good. Indeed, in its heady days it thought of itself as a party-within-a-party. Then good sense prevailed, at a price.

Some members feel that their youth wing has now become indistinguishable from the senior party, which would cause it to lose its appeal and influence on the young.

I would hesitate to agree with that, although I do have qualms about Umno Youth becoming too chummy with the central leadership. Youth wings are meant to disseminate the party's gospel among the young, campaign for the party within their age groups and inject young blood into the hierarchy of the senior party. Although they are expected to retain a degree of independence, they are not intended to behave like a separate faction beholden to no one but themselves.

Unlike most party youth organisations, whose age limit rarely exceeds 25 years, Umno Youth members can go as old as 40, by which time they really should have graduated, and taken their ambitions into the main party.

I also think that Umno Youth's quiet dissenters are wrong in another central aspect: the youth of today are less exceptional for their "militant tendencies" than for their general apathy.

Pas seems to have grabbed the lion's share of the radical fringe among the Malays. But they will remain a small minority as long as Umno provides alternatives that answer young people's aspirations. Politics can be serious fun, even for the jaded youth of today's MTV generation - if only Umno Youth were more imaginative and savvy.

Strategically, the formation of Puteri Umno was an unbeatable idea - not just because it addressed the young but that it was in a position to show the menfolk a thing or two.

After the 1999 general election, Umno certainly did need to learn a thing or two, not just about reinforcing its hold on the centre, but about winning over young voters who had tested their democratic rights for the first time by largely, so it seemed, supporting the Opposition.

Tactically, Puteri Umno stood to steal a long march on Pas, whose Dewan Muslimat was less a women's wing than an institutionalised pretext to keep them excluded and dependent. While Pas hems and haws about allowing women to stand for election, Puteri Umno could advance its cadres forward to the political barricades.

That was exactly what it did. Under Azalina Othman Said, Puteri Umno has

certainly gone where no princess has gone before - into the thick of the testosterone-driven campaigning for Anak Bukit and Pendang in July, where a supposed Pas supporter, in the most unmanly gesture of all, employed genital exposure to get them off his turf.

Politics is a man's business, but men admire and fall head over heels for women with political muscle and guts. Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher could not have done better if they wore trousers and sported a moustache. (That isn't just a joke, many people think Meir actually had one.)

For Puteri Umno, the macho snickering might still go on for a while, but with more than 90,000 members in the bag in its first year of existence, the men will eventually have to take off their songkok, if they haven't done so already.

I'm glad that Puteri Umno has been allowed to go through the trial-by-fire of its inaugural elections in November. Some stout defenders of womanhood in Umno have urged that the virginal young women's wing should not be tainted by anything so unfeminine as a hard-fought leadership tussle.

Others think that "washing dirty linen in public" - in reference to the allegations and innuendoes thrown about in the run-up to the contest - could undermine Umno itself.

However, the very fact that they've weighed in shows how far Puteri Umno has come and how high Azalina and her battalions have raised the stakes. I wish her challengers Mastina Abdul Hamid, Raihan Suleiman and Mazibah Mohd Zin luck, although I think Azalina will win handily.

Puteri Umno could still show the men how to conduct a non-divisive party election and Azalina could yet demonstrate to her Umno Youth counterparts that politics is not for the faint-hearted or the weak-kneed. All is fair in love, war and politics.

All political parties should seriously take into account the young voters in their political theorising and strategising as well as induct them into the rough-and-tumble of democratic competition. I'm glad Umno leads others in this.

Puteri Umno's actual and potential contribution has been openly acknowledged. In its conduct of a free and fair election, it could, to borrow from Mark Twain, gratify some and astonish the rest.