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Old habits and new beginnings

AZALINA Othman Said's walkover at the inaugural Puteri Umno election should have said it all. Perhaps the margin or lack thereof (she won uncontested, with nominations from all divisions) of her always certain victory had left her opponents with nothing but the tactics of the dirty tricks department. Still, the allegations against Azalina left a bitter taste to what would otherwise have been a sweet victory - not just for her but her many senior colleagues in Umno whose popularity had never been sullied by calumny.

If the Puteri Umno poll had anything to prove, it was that Umno could conduct a free, fair and clean election without slander and enmity. Unburdened by the scars and injuries of the rough trade of political campaigning, the novice, young women's wing of the country's largest political party was expected to teach its seniors a thing or two. But amid the well-earned festivity of Puteri Umno's first general assembly on Friday, the lessons appeared to have been handed down in the opposite direction.

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned the unfledged movement against learning too fast, too soon. "I hope the sickness which afflicted the older generation will not spread to the younger generation," he told the assembly. The taint of sex and sleaze splattered on Azalina was cheap and vicious, the more so because of its futility. Not so long ago, party factions had done the same thing against opponents they knew they couldn't beat. Whispered innuendoes and poison pen letters were (and still are) circulated to inflate an outside chance, and then kept up out of sheer spite. In Umno politics, where even the rowdiest campaigning is tempered by Malay politesse, such scandal-mongering has an insidious way of staying in the mind.

Puteri Umno began in April last year as part Umno's continuing commitment to re-invent itself, to break old habits and heal old wounds. It has remained in power since two years before Independence largely out of a sincere belief in the existence of a broad middle ground in which there is space enough for all Malaysians. Within this centre there is also room for forgiveness. Dr Mahathir has invited the Opposition to join the Barisan Nasional, or rather to return to their natural home. In multi-racial Malaysia, national unity governments are not just a forced response to national emergencies. Too much energy has been wasted by corrosive politicking, both inside and outside Umno. Better to redirect that effort in pulling the country together for what lies ahead. Alas, Dr Mahathir's good intentions have so far been rudely rebuffed.