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A soul-destroying power

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THE Prime Minister and president of Umno has at last openly raised questions about politicians flaunting their position and wealth - the latter presumably acquired while in office for a majority of them. Few in politics here have private means.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad didn't say it but, by implication, he is far from happy by the apparently psychological need that some ruling politicians seem to have to prove that they are special and richer than other Malaysians.

Some politicians have become so arrogant that they really believe their power and money can do anything. An obnoxious one struts the nation (like the US on the world stage) with the bravado of having everything to teach other people and nothing to learn from anyone.

Dr Mahathir was rather kind when he said that the voters would not respect the nouveau riche and their wives who jaunt and junket around, displaying their wealth. The people resent them and Umno suffers. And in the case of Barisan Nasional component parties, they too suffer, if not electorally, then in the eyes of people with good taste and manners.

It's not hubris or superficiality but humility that characterises the Malays. What went wrong?

We are not an absolute monarchy. Here the people rule. They must be rendered happy, or at least not provoked into taking offence, or they will overturn the Government, as they have in Kelantan for 35 out of 45 years of independence, and in Terengganu since 1999. The consent of the governed must always be secured.

No goodwill is earned by being snobbish, arrogant and elitist, nor will pretending to be clever by half fool many in politics.

I fear that we are making a political caste out of illbred parvenus rather than well-bred "men of the people". My heart sinks when I compare the BN's activists in the run-up to Independence and two decades thence with today's flashy leaders.

Umno, the party all Malaysians owe so much to, used to be miserably poor. Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra had to sell his hereditary properties in Kedah and Penang to fund it. He would stay with friends as he toured the length and breadth of the peninsula. Wanita Umno members pawned or sold their jewellery for the party. There were innumerable instances of personal sacrifice, of grizzled old folk forking out crumpled notes, of time and energy given freely.

The Tengku said in his writings that we never received help in our fight for independence. The only assistance came from some Thais, who wanted our neutrality against the separatist movements in the south of their country. Throughout, the Tengku maintained Umno's self-supporting voluntarism scrupulously.

Umno's inspiration came from the heart. It met in small gatherings, in balai penghulu, coffeeshops, schools, town halls and the homes of Malays of all classes. Members eventually raised enough to build a party headquarters - a four-storey block in Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman that was smaller than some millionaire politicians' mansions today - in 1955.

If the meetings got too big, as they progressively did, they were held in hotels such as the Majestic (now an art gallery), the Federal, the Merlin (now the Concorde) and the Hilton (now Mutiara). Today, even a branch committee meeting is held in a major hotel.

Umno would probably have remained a tightly knit, homespun fraternity of politically-conscious but unambitious people led by an upper-class elite had it not been for the 1969 general election and the race riots that followed. Thereafter history was made thick and fast. Umno had to become a mass party to fortify an unassailable voting majority and push Malay interests forward.

For this, it needed money. Umno did not become financially independent until Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah became party treasurer in the early 1970s. He organised party funds and Tun Daim Zainuddin subsequently enlarged them. Whatever people say about Razaleigh and Daim - both of whom, as my contemporaries and compatriots, I know pretty well - they left Umno in sound financial standing.

The only difference between me and them is that I remain a reporter.

Many critics believe that Umno's on-going era of self-enriching "corporatism" began from then on. It wasn't as simple as that. The party's role had changed from that of a single-issue movement for independence to a modern, multi-platformed force for democratic change.

As the Government itself expanded to fulfil the obligations of the New Economic Policy, so did Umno's work of sustaining a consensus, the Barisan Nasional's two-thirds majority in Parliament and broad-based popular support.

From then on, it became difficult to keep the big bucks away from politics. But the influence of money in the political process might not be the ugly demon that most people instinctively assume it to be. And let not the Opposition presume to wear a halo over this. They are avaricious too, and, believe me, their inability to raise money is only an appearance. Pas - the party that stands to gain most from the scorn felt for Umno's rich show-offs - is busily building its patronage networks and edifices in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and even in the Federal Territory.

Like it or not, "money politics" mostly applies to democracies.

In Japan, pork-barrel politics in the Diet began after the Meiji Restoration at the end of the 19th century, mainly because parliamentarians were so poorly paid and their constituents wanted tangible payback. Bribery scandals began to rise sharply in Korea after the democratic transition starting in 1987, when business found it could grease the wheels of policy and law-making.

Of course, Mammon's presence is most obvious in the "best democracy money can buy" - the United States. President George W. Bush raised a record US\$193 million (RM733 million) for his campaign in 2000. Senator Phil Gramm, a gregarious fundraiser, once said, "I have the best friend you can have in politics - ready money."

And let's not talk about the fundraising culture of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's New Labour Party. So keep your silence, you self-styled genteel hypocrites!

The larger Umno became, and it now has four million members, the more money became the tool of the ambitious. A lot of it was reportedly used to bankroll Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's meteoric rise in the mid-1980s. A lot of it went about too in the titanic battle for the party presidency between Razaleigh and Dr Mahathir in 1987.

Money politics cropped up again when Anwar took over from Tun Ghafar Baba as the party deputy president in 1993. Not long after, the party convened an extraordinary general meeting to amend its constitution to stop vote buying in elections. But with the economy growing rapidly and businesses booming, the in-flow of money was barely controllable.

I was told by an impeccable source that one Umno leader spent RM9 million to win a seat in the supreme council, only to lose it at the subsequent poll. Today, spending millions to win positions is said to be

routine. The worst of it is that the contestants would have to recoup their outlays. How then can an ex-school teacher with two wives, three cars and two lavish homes finance his campaign?

Not without some dubious wheelings and dealings. Having been an Umno division head for two decades (probably much longer, had it not been for my detention), I know how much it can cost. When I was Deputy Minister, on top of my salary, I had to call on all my independent means to support myself, my family and the division.

With the economic slowdown, and the Umno disciplinary committee breathing down contestants' necks, money politics declined in the last party elections. Now, with easy finances in short supply, the displays of wealth by party leaders are even more egregious.

Few can deny that money politics is hard to uproot. All the recent hand wringing in the US over campaign finance reform - the caps on donations, the curbs on "soft money" and the restrictions on unaccountable "political action committees" - will not amount to much.

Stricter laws can impede political work and will only encourage funding back-channels and creative revenue generation. Reform advocates are left to be comforted by the essential knowingness of the electorate. Money cannot simply buy elections. Even in the US, the candidate with more cash does not automatically win. This is a lesson our politicians must learn with some urgency. It is the message that counts, in substance, form and presentation.

Ultimately, only the character, honesty and integrity of the political leaders can ensure that money is used wisely. It is very clear that the current situation cannot and must not continue. The way that money has been allowed to corrupt the behaviour of political leaders is soul-destroying. Umno is paying the price for its success, albeit in the wrong way.

The border has been reached, and unless contained - then ideally pushed back - the voters will become disillusioned and exhausted long before we realise it. We are already seeing some of the consequences.

For years, Dr Mahathir has warned of the dangers of unfettered money politics - alas only to be ignored by the perpetrators. And now we witness the sorry spectacle of unrestrained extravagance, with an unrefined new culture of greed and power. Umno and the BN must return to being as close to and as representative of the people as possible. It must not build walls, and hold itself above and apart from the multitudes who still love the party, depend and place their hopes on it.

I am glad Dr Mahathir has spoken up. What is now happening is so damaging that silence is no longer an option.