

How to swim with the rest

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COMMENT BY WONG CHUN WAI

DEPUTY Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has several glass containers of various shapes on the table in the dining hall at his residence in Putrajaya.

The containers do not merely serve as decorative items. Abdullah uses them to keep fighting fish, which bring him pleasant memories of his childhood in Kepala Batas.

Along the padi fields, located next to the family house in Jalan Perak, Abdullah used to catch fighting fish in the canals, and train mynah birds to sing and perch on his shoulders.

"You cannot put all of them in one bottle. If you do, they will fight," the Umno deputy president says, as he points out to his listeners that each container has only one fish.

Just outside the porch of his Putrajaya house, however, is a small pond where he keeps Japanese carp. Pak Lah makes it a point to briefly look at the fishes each time he comes home from work.

For visitors to Abdullah's house, they know the symbolic difference - there are fish that fight among



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taken aback by his unusually harsh words.

Those close to him offered reasons for such a speech. One was the constant politicking among party leaders as the leadership transition took place.

Over the past week, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah voiced fears that party leaders would jostle for the deputy president's post after the latter took over the party leadership.

themselves and those that know the meaning of togetherness.

Abdullah, as he has consistently done, sent a loud reminder to Umno members yesterday evening when he opened the Youth, Wanita and Puteri general assemblies at PWTC.

"Today, Malays do not prioritise unity. Anything can divide them. Jostling for positions in the party, unfounded accusations against the leadership, disappointment for not receiving business opportunities, incitement by opposition parties, and a false sense of security," he said.

That is not all. There are the small fry, or low-level leaders without any record of service to the party and country but who behave like big fish. Then, there are others who constantly complain their containers are too small for them.

These are the members who feel the party membership is a passport, even a right, to contracts, positions and titles. The culture, unfortunately, has become entrenched in Umno.

Umno, formed to fight for the country's independence, is in danger of becoming a rich man's club if urgent steps are not taken to reinvent itself.

Abdullah said that this included renewed commitment and dedication to the party's cause.

For how long does Umno want to tolerate having members with such shallow attitudes?

These are certainly strong words from a politician regarded as mild-mannered.

Umno members, used to the niceties of Pak Lah, must have been

The bitter experience of Umno being deregistered in 1988 after Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah fought Dr Mahathir is fresh in the minds of party members.

Unless Umno members take the wake-up call seriously, the party will find its clout seriously eroded if members continue to put personal interests above that of the party.

But there is hope. With its voice of moderation, Umno is looked up to, not just by Malays, but by Malaysians of all races and religions, who believe there is no place for extremism and fanaticism.

Since the formation of the Alliance and its successor the Barisan, the country's three main parties - Umno, MCA and MIC - have committed themselves to the politics of consensus and proven that the sharing of power has worked well.

Many Umno members, particularly those in the rural heartland, have remained true to the struggles of the party, believing the party remains the best choice.

"I believe there are many Umno members who do not hold titles, who do not hold positions, who do not have any special standing, who have never set foot in this hall, let alone meet the prime minister, who possess the greatest loyalty to the party, and a pure and profound belief in our struggle," said Abdullah.

The ocean is big, and with over two million Umno members, there is plenty of good talent to choose from, but the troublemakers, who put personal interests first, will need to be contained.