

11/07/2004

Ugly fights but Umno will survive

By Kalimullah Hassan

MY Chinese friends often tell me that fortune seldom stays in a family for more than three generations. They rattle off names of businesses built over the years which were reduced to nothingness when passed on to the third generation.

It's not entirely true because there are fortunes built in the 1800s, like Selangor Pewter (now known as Royal Selangor) , which are stronger and bigger than ever today.

But by and large, many of the tycoons of yesteryear would turn in their graves if they were to see how their descendants have whittled away the riches.

A more hard-nosed analysis will show that in the majority of such cases, it was lack of succession planning or power struggles and family disputes that led to the destruction of these businesses.

Some of the most brilliant of businessmen had the false notion that they would live forever and kept a tight rein on the controls until a sudden stroke or illness rendered it too late to orderly pass the wheel to a competent successor.

As it is for businesses, it is with politics.

Malaysia is not the only country in the world where political infighting is incessant. But it probably has the distinction of having one of the largest numbers of political parties, if not the world, at least in this region.

Hence, if there is no tussle for power in the Malaysian Chinese Association or the Malaysian Indian Congress or Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu, then one can certainly rely on good old Umno to provide the excitement for political junkies.

Being the dominant political party in the country, contests in Umno are always keener, more exciting and most closely watched.

It is also probably the most democratic party in the whole country with contests keenly fought right from the thousands of branches to the 191 divisions and on to the 25 elected Umno supreme council posts and the main positions in the Youth, Wanita and Puteri wings.

Such fights are often divisive but Umno has remained intact and firmly entrenched largely because it has had a fairly smooth handover of power from one president to another rather than acrimonious and divisive battles for succession.

None of the six presidents Umno has had since it was formed in 1946 came into power through bitter political contest, save maybe Tunku Abdul Rahman after the party's founder president, Datuk Onn Jaafar, quit in 1951.

The last two, Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, willingly relinquished power when they felt that they had served their time or when their successors were ready.

Never has any Umno president tried to cling on to power at all costs to the detriment of the party. This is one of Umno's greatest strengths.

Today, as Umno enters the second phase of its once-in-three-years election for the supreme council, members are witnessing jostling, elbowing and plain hard shoving for power at all levels.

Politicians are probably more adept at masking their real side than other professionals. What the people see is what politicians want people to see. But it is in elections - whether it's a fight to rule the country or the party - that we see the weaknesses and the strengths that under

normal circumstances stay hidden behind the political face.

Young Hishammuddin Hussein, the grandson of Datuk Onn and the son of Tun Hussein, illustrates the qualities of a leader who values continuity over personal triumph.

He may have, in his initial years, been aided by his pedigree as he climbed the steps to political stardom. But he has proven his mettle and is today a leader in his own right.

Elevated to the key post of Education Minister by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, himself a man single-minded in desire to prepare the leaders of tomorrow, Hishammuddin could easily have sought one of the three elected vice-presidential slots and he would have had an edge over most of the other aspirants.

He has a deputy, Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir, who is retiring after reaching 40, the maximum age for Umno Youth. And if Hishammuddin was led by his ambition, then he would have been remiss in his duties as he had no successor to take over his job.

Despite efforts to persuade him otherwise, including arguments from Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Khir Toyo who himself wanted a shot at the Umno Youth presidency if it was vacated, Hishammuddin stood his ground and opted to stay at least one more term to prepare an able successor.

Hishammuddin is certainly one of the younger leaders who Abdullah and his deputy, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, are looking at to keep the Umno flag flying.

Hishammuddin's Cabinet colleague and counterpart in Wanita Umno, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, is one minister who can hold her own against the best in the world. She will lock horns with anyone, her only priority and objective being looking after her country's interests.

Spotted by Tun Razak, a visionary leader with an uncanny ability to recognise talent, Rafidah was plucked out of her job as a university lecturer to become a political leader. She became a minister at the age of 35 in 1978 and has performed ever since.

Yet, it must have been strange for anyone tracing her career path to hear her admonish Puteri members, who had passed the 35-year age limit for membership in that movement, for wanting to challenge Wanita leaders in the division.

She said they were still too young and wanted them to wait three years before contesting.

The women of today are a different breed from those of 30 years ago when Rafidah was one of a rare breed of professional, well-qualified Malay women. Today's Malaysian women can compete with men on an equal footing and are leaders in many fields.

If a Rafidah of 35 was "old" enough to be a minister in the federal Cabinet, then certainly the Puteri of the new millennium are not too young at 35 to contest posts at that lower rung of the Umno political hierarchy, the division.

Rafidah has one of Malaysia's sharpest minds and is not prone to making careless statements. Her concern, probably, was coloured by the fears expressed to her by Wanita divisional leaders who were insecure about their positions.

To Rafidah's credit, she has not sought to publicly push the issue further.

But Hishammuddin and Rafidah are a different category of leaders. They are among Umno's best, proven and tested.

There are already battles emerging at divisional and youth levels which show the uglier side of some leaders and would-be leaders, where loyalty is seasonal, where friendship is transitory, where principles are

forfeited and redeemed as a matter of consequence, where prudence and sensibility are cast aside and where sheer lust for power becomes the only driving force.

There is one division where two good friends and business colleagues are clawing at each other's throats. Backbiting and assaults on each other's character have replaced the camaraderie and solidarity of a relationship built over years. They may never be friends again, even after the dust settles and the elections are forgotten.

In another division, a leader, perhaps out of insecurity, perhaps out of the temporary insanity that grabs some during this season, has turned against his long-time mentor's offspring. For no sane reason, he has even questioned his own mentor's credibility and sincerity. Another relationship that may never be salvaged again.

There are more.

One divisional leader, for example, baited an aspiring national leader, via SMS, about a circulating poison-pen letter. The aspiring leader, in complete confidence, relayed via SMS his inner-most thoughts on who he thought his political enemies circulating the poison-pen letter were.

The "trusted" divisional leader forwarded the SMS to others, and inner-most thoughts were secret no more. More friendships ruined, more enemies created in the season of madness.

There are some leaders with a reputation for having the most sinuous of political principles, swiftly jumping ship when their survival is at stake. One or two are even in high office at state and federal levels.

But all said and done, the ugly politician is a minority. Umno leaders have themselves said that in a party of three million members, there will be a few sordid, disgruntled, malcontent, dishonest and unprincipled ingrates.

The fact is that in more than 60 per cent of the divisions, there were no major fights and whatever changes occurred, it happened in a civilised and friendly manner. In the large majority of the divisions where there are contests, challenges are more friendly than divisive.

That, probably, is why Umno has survived 58 years and will continue to survive. Because the good guys always outnumber the bad ones.

In Umno's case, at least, the fourth generational change theory does not apply.

(END)