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The dynamics of Umno and democracy

By A Kadir Jasin

TUN DR Mahathir Mohamad could not have been serious (or was he?) when he said the Barisan Nasional (BN) won handsomely in the March 21 polls due partly to his retirement.

Speaking at the 10th anniversary celebration of the Cheras Umno Division in early April, the former Prime Minister was quoted by The Star newspaper as saying that his retirement from politics was one of the likely reasons for the BN's victory.

I would say this; the BN might not have won at all if he, in his 21 years as Prime Minister, had messed up the country. In fact, the BN and him could have been voted out a long time ago.

On the contrary, he left behind a peaceful country, a sufficiently robust economy, a united Umno and a strong BN. Could we ask for more?

It could be true that there was an element of uneasiness or even anger between him and some segments of Umno and the broader population over the expulsion of his once close ally and anointed successor Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. He paid for it pretty dearly in the 1999 general election when the BN won the lowest majority in the five national polls he led. He paid the price.

Thus, with no major national issues to address, Dr Mahathir's chosen successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was able to capitalise on his likeable personality and vision of a new era to convince the voters to give him a chance.

Dr Mahathir, on his part, had lived up to his promise that he would hand over the whole of Umno to his successor instead of a faction of it. Having been involved in the fractious 1987 party fight, Abdullah would be the first to understand what it means to inherit a united party.

Dr Mahathir's other great gesture is keeping away from politics - something that cannot be easy for a man who has devoted his entire life to it. So, there is no need for Dr Mahathir to feel bad about not being able to do more for Umno and the BN in the recent general election. He has done more than enough not just for Umno and the BN, but, in fact, for the whole country.

There would not have been a robust and broad-based economy, young people whizzing around in their flashy BMWs and big imported motor cycles and ivy-collegians hailing from the United Kingdom, the US and Australia had it not been for him. There would not also have been the 'Students for Vision 2020' which, in the early 1990s, brought together the best and the brightest young Malaysians from local and foreign universities.

This writer is pleased to note that today, many in the group hold key positions in politics, administration and business and would like, if possible, to share some affinity with these bright young people, on account that he spoke to them during their seminar.

While there is nothing wrong in celebrating what is current, contemporary and in vogue, it would be wise to occasionally allow some space for the learning and understanding of history. After all, our new Prime Minister is the product of history - a long and checkered one. He would not be where he is today had he not been an astute student of history. As the popular Malay song by Khatijah Ibrahim and Ramli Sarip goes, sejarah mengajar kita menjadi lebih dewasa meniti arus angkara (History teaches us to become wiser to face the challenges of the future).

Thankfully, Abdullah has not forgotten history and, as any well brought-

up person should know, he has not forgotten the good deeds of his predecessor. That is how I would like to view Dr Mahathir's appointments as adviser to Petronas and more recently to Proton. The man still has much to offer.

#### CELEBRATING DEMOCRACY

HISTORY also tells us that Umno is among the most democratic political parties in Malaysia. Abdullah reiterated this point, albeit indirectly, when he said he welcomed a contest for the vice-president's posts at the party's coming election.

Speaking to the Singapore-based television station Channel News Asia on April 19, Abdullah said whoever wanted to contest the posts should be given encouragement. Although his statement was not widely reported by the local newspapers, it serves to clear the air concerning the contest for the three third-most important posts in the party.

Although Umno came into being in 1946 less for the purpose of promoting democracy to the otherwise feudalistic Malay society than to oppose the British Malayan Union proposal, democracy has become its modus operandi.

By giving Malay grassroot associations, individuals and businesses the right to determine the party's leadership and policies, Umno popularised the idea of public participation in decision-making, a process which hitherto had been the right and prerogative of the ruling class.

Thus, while opposition to the post-Second World War British plan to re-establish and strengthen its colonisation of Malaya was the *raison d'etre* for the formation of the party, it was the democratisation of the decision-making process that perpetuated its popularity and endurance.

The saying in Umno is that for the price of RM1 - the fee a member pays annually - a person has the right to determine who presides over the party and claims the Prime Minister's post.

#### TAKING UP THE GAUNTLET

THE democratic process was put to the test less than five years after the formation of Umno when its founding-president Datuk Onn Jaafar was forced to submit to the voice of the majority.

Onn favoured opening the party to non-Malays. The Umno executive committee and the general assembly shot it down. Recognising that he had lost the confidence of the party, he resigned as president, and on Aug 25, 1951 left the party to be succeeded by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra.

Onn went on to form the lacklustre Independent of Malaya Party (IMP) and later Parti Negara that did not survive beyond the 1959 general election. Democracy flourished under Tunku, who despite being a prince, cherished the participation of the ordinary people in the fight against the Malayan Union proposal and later in the struggle for independence.

He was a democrat to the last, braving challenges to his leadership of the party and the government, and standing by his views and beliefs. As Umno president, he was challenged by a prominent Penang politician, C M Yusof, but prevailed. Instead of banishing Yusof, Tunku consented to his appointment as Speaker of the Dewan Rakyat.

In the post-May 13, 1969 race riots, Tunku was openly challenged by Dr Mahathir. Their differences and the long-running feuds were well known. But eventually, it was Dr Mahathir who installed Tunku as the country's elder statesman.

If today the party's democratic credential is not very visible or, as some would put it, questionable, it is because there have been attempts to dampen the practice, especially in the election of supreme council members.

Either for selfish reasons or out of genuine concern that unabated competition for posts would split the party, attempts have been made to either discourage or limit competition for the supreme council posts, in

particular the top two posts - president and deputy president. This fear is not unfounded. Democracy suffered a crippling blow in 1987 when Dr Mahathir's opponents, led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, took the party to court after failing to topple him in the supreme council election, resulting in Umno being declared unlawful and subsequently deregistered.

The split became permanent when Tengku Razaleigh and the majority of his 'Team B' followers left to form the now-defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46.

A CONTEST OR NO-CONTEST?

YET, it was not the challenge against Dr Mahathir that tore the party apart but the way it was mounted and the refusal of the losers to accept defeat. In fact, all Umno presidents and Prime Ministers, except Tun Abdul Razak Hussain, were challenged at party elections. Tunku was challenged by Yusof and Tun Hussein Onn by Sulaiman Palestin, another Penang-based Umno leader.

The challenge against Dr Mahathir would not have amounted to anything more than ruffled feathers had it not been for the prevalence of money politics and the refusal of the losers to accept defeat.

The race for the deputy president's post was equally keen, if not keener. The recent decades saw Tengku Razaleigh challenging Tan Sri Musa Hitam twice (1981 and 1984), Tun Ghaffar Baba taking on Musa in 1987 and Anwar confronting Ghafar in 1996. Under pressure, Ghafar withdrew to give Anwar a walkover victory.

For Dr Mahathir, it was the 1987 challenge that established him as the true leader of the party and rendered all subsequent attempts to unseat him ineffectual. The president's post has not been contested since then and deputy president's post since 1996.

LET DEMOCRACY PREVAIL

LATELY, there have been views expressed to the effect that even the contest for the vice-president's posts should be limited with the incumbents being returned unopposed. Abdullah's statement to the Singapore TV station should put an end to this kind of talk.

The signs of growing intolerance towards people who believe in perpetuating the democratic practice of the party is seen in the reaction to the announcement by the newly elected Kota Bharu Member of Parliament, Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, that he planned to contest the vice-president's post.

He was nearly 'shouted down' not just by party operators but also by a segment of the mainstream media. He was accused of being power crazy (gila kuasa) and portrayed as a lowly person dreaming of riding an elephant.

Denying the allegations, Zaid said he wanted to see Umno returning to the days when the democratic process was not so restrictive, adding that he wished to promote the idea that party positions should not always be associated with government posts.

Zaid had, either deliberately or inadvertently, rekindled a debate in the late 1990s when he argued that it was important to make a distinction between the Government and the party, saying that there must be people in Umno who were willing to speak up for its agenda.

The debate centred on the contention that there should be a dichotomy between the Malays on one hand and Umno and the Government on the other. The premise then was that the Government's voice did not necessarily represent the sentiments of the Malays and Umno, and that Umno did not represent the whole of the Malay race.

It involved a wide spectrum of the Malay intelligentsia, including former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, Utusan Malaysia columnist Lanang Sejagat, writer Jaafar Rahim and Datuk Zainuddin Maidin (now Deputy Information Minister), academicians Rustam A Sani and Datuk Dr Mahadzir Mohd Khir (now Deputy Education Minister), writer Kasim Ahmad and opposition politician Syed Husin Ali.

It started when this writer wrote in the Mingguan Malaysia newspaper (Feb 18, 1996) an article entitled Suara Melayu, Umno dan Kerajaan (The Voice of the Malays, Umno and the Government) and culminated it two years later in a book entitled Melayu Hilang Keberanian - Suatu Polimik (The Malays Have Lost Courage - A Polemic) (Pustaka Budaya Agency).

With Umno re-asserting its dominance in national politics - winning 109 out of 219 parliamentary seats in the recent general election - there is a need for a segment of its leaders and elected representatives to stay clear of government posts so that they can speak up more freely for the interest of the party and the Malays.

Zaid's contention that people in top government posts could not always speak up for the party and Malays because 'they had to protect their positions and would be reluctant to criticise themselves' was the crux of the 1996 debate.

The Kelantan Umno Deputy Liaison Chief was not being melodramatic when he asserted that 'we are not in a communist system where you have to be in the political bureau to serve in the Government'. He was being factual.

With growing membership of young and educated people, Umno must provide sufficient leeway and opportunity for them to hone their skills and use democracy to test their leadership quality.

Democracy is not bad. What gives democracy a bad name is the unscrupulous people who take advantage of it to perpetuate their personal agenda. Thus, instead of doubting democracy, Umno should use it to rid itself of plotters, conspirators and 'moneypulators'.

#### WHITHER SOCIO-ECONOMIC PLANNING?

BUT we cannot talk about democracy and not practise it. History tells us that some decades ago, we popularised the term 'house-owning democracy'. The idea was for the success of our democratic practice to be measured, among other things, by the degree to which we made house ownership accessible to the people.

We have, to a large degree, succeeded in the plan. But in recent years, as the economy became more mature and exposed to the vagaries of the global economy, poverty and thus house ownership became more intricate.

The recent controversy surrounding the unsold low-cost housing units in Selangor that led to the Menteri Besar, Datuk Seri Dr Mohamed Khir Toyo, proposing rather naively that they be sold to rich people who would then rent them to the poor, is symptomatic of this problem.

Thankfully, the Prime Minister saw both the frivolity of Khir's proposal and the political backlash it could cause. He speedily put a stop to it.

In the broader term, the mismatch between the supply and demand of low-cost housing units suggests a greater malaise in socio-economic planning, which in recent years has appeared to confuse the economy and business.

Allowing developers to build massive townships, sometimes on state land, would not solve the housing problems of the poor if the houses are not reasonably priced and not located in economically viable areas.

The end result is developers make their pile by jacking up the prices of the land and giving construction jobs to their own companies and associates, while leaving billions of ringgit worth of property unsold and billions more unoccupied. We are even confusing the very objective of launching national projects like Proton, which is essentially to build economic capacities instead of pure buying and selling.

Thankfully, Proton owners and managers now have Dr Mahathir to teach them a bit about its history and how to survive the future.

Otherwise, their interest appears to be more about out-doing and out-smarting one another as was apparent in a recent attempt to pressure its Chief Executive Officer Tengku Tan Sri Mahaleel Tengku Ariff to leave.

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