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Enhancing Umno unity

EVER mindful that, like a woven fabric, the Umno of today is the work of many hands, in his speech at the Umno meeting yesterday, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi paid tribute to the contributions of the past and present presidents, and the Wanita, Youth and Puteri movements. What is equally meaningful is his acknowledgement of the Umno members who do not hold any "titles", "positions", or "special standing", and who have not "even set foot in this hall, let alone met the Prime Minister". The common thread that binds them to the leaders of Umno is that they "possess the greatest loyalty to the party, and a pure and profound belief" in Umno's struggle - "to unite the Malays and to safeguard and champion their interests".

This takes on great significance because some of the toughest problems which beset Umno are those created by the successes of the past which have eroded the deep sense of moral purpose and duty which earlier leaders and members possessed. Like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah is concerned about the politics of complacency as a result of more than half a century of political independence and economic prosperity. Abdullah worries that "success has spoilt and undermined the mindset of the Malays to the extent that they now think they are secure and can do just about anything they want". Another malady is the naked lust for power within the party. If Umno were to be destroyed, it would be from the enemy within. Umno cannot afford to be dazzled by the bombast of demagogues and divided by a clash of selfish interests. A return to the ideals of national and collective interests over individual and group interests is therefore a necessary condition for the survival of the party. The interest of the nation and party is above everything else.

The pragmatism with which Umno has represented Malay aspirations and Islamic ideals has allowed Malaysians of all races and religions to live together peacefully and democratically. This model of a progressive political party of Muslims in a multi-ethnic democratic system has attracted regional and international interest, the latest of which is Turkey's ruling Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP), which is exploring brotherly ties with Umno.