

19/06/2003

New generation of Umno Youth, Puteri throng PWTC

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VISITORS to the Putra World Trade Centre for the past two days would have been overwhelmed by the sea of young Umno Youth and Puteri Umno delegates packed into the venue.

Smartly-dressed in their white baju Melayu or baju kurung with pink headscarves, many look like they're barely in their 20s.

Only a number of years back, the only opportunity they would have had to participate in the annual party general assembly was probably as student observers.

Now, those born after implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1970 are no longer mere observers.

They are coming of age in the party, poised to continue in the frontlines of the party's struggle when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad steps aside in October.

Would the NEP generation of Umno members, nurtured on idealisms and values which at times differ from their party seniors, be able to take over the party's struggle?

Their strong presence at this year's assembly marks a notable shift from previous years, especially before the 1999 general election.

Then, delegates and party leaders were mostly from a completely different generation, consisting of those in their 40s and above.

They spoke and addressed the Bumiputera community mostly as elder siblings or parents who knew what was good for them.

The generation gap was evident, but the party's efforts to recruit new members and create a specific wing - Puteri Umno - to rope young women into the party, have now borne fruit.

There is a growing number of leaders in Umno who are from the NEP generation - ranging from Puteri Umno head Azalina Othman Said to Umno Youth exco Khairy Jamaluddin.

While the NEP generation has so far been mainly passive observers of the party's difficulties following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim (and the subsequent erosion of support of Umno during the 1999 general election) they will soon be at the forefront.

It is a challenging assignment.

"The erosion of support in the 1999 general election spurred the need to win back lost ground, especially from the younger generation," said Azalina.

"Puteri Umno was born from this concern, the worry about a possible loss of continuity in the leadership of the party if younger members were not recruited," she added.

As supreme council member and former Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi recalled, "we as seniors in Umno were tasked with helping to build up the idealism among the younger generation who will continue the party's struggle.

"The idealism has to be translated by the younger generation into commitment to make sure that Umno is relevant in future. If they don't, there will be a very dear price to pay."

The support for Umno among the younger generation and their participation as members may have grown tremendously following the regeneration campaign, but it has not always been the case.

A section of support among the younger generation of Bumiputera professionals and graduates swung over to the opposition during the 1999

polls.

Umno, realising the problem, mounted efforts to address the situation and to regain lost ground.

Like the troubled relationship between the teenager and his stern but concerned parent, greater emphasis was placed on making it easier for new members to join the party and on the contribution which they would be allowed to make.

There are tales about the Malay graduate, who completed his studies at a prestigious university in Britain and returned to Malaysia determined to help bring about the downfall of Umno.

He and many others who shared such sentiments were quickly co-opted into the party, and are now some of Umno's staunchest supporters.

Party deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also took a leading role to co-opt students at local institutions of higher learning and establish the National Students Consultative Council.

The regeneration of Umno has borne fruit at a momentous time for the party, as it is preparing for the departure of Dr Mahathir and to face the next general election.

Umno Youth information chief Azimi Daim described the challenge facing the next generation of party leaders when proposing the motion of thanks to the movement's opening speech yesterday.

"They are helping the movement at a time when a segment of support among the younger generation in our party has shifted to the opposition."

The coming of age of Umno's NEP generation was also noted by Terengganu Umno Youth chief Din Adam, who seconded the motion.

"This is a bittersweet moment for me; as I will soon be 40 years-old, this will be the last time that I will be here as a delegate of Umno Youth, and I will move on to the party proper at a time when Dr Mahathir will no longer lead us."

For Azalina, the burden of leading a movement that has come to symbolise the renewed interest and support from the younger generation is not lost.

"Puteri Umno members should be extremely worried, because as the younger generation members in the party, we will be held responsible if Umno loses support."

For the NEP generation, the future direction of Umno which Dr Mahathir will spell out and his reminders to members will no longer be remarks that applies only to the seniors.

It would be reminders directed to those who will be counted upon to continue the struggle.

Upon closer observation, one could almost see etched on the faces of many among the young delegates a mixture of emotions, ranging from sadness at Dr Mahathir's departure to anxiety over the heavy responsibilities which they now shoulder.