

02/02/2003

Picking the right candidates

Shamsul Akmar

UNEASY lies the head that wears the crown, a proverb with which Umno leaders should by now be familiar. Sometimes the crown does not seem to fit, while at other times it fits but lacks in lustre.

Efforts to put a sheen on the crown seem to be intensifying of late. Apart from changing the Kelantan Umno leadership, calls for long-serving leaders to give way to new faces should make the crown glow.

This, however, is not the real test. Whether the crown remains perched on Umno's top will be seen only at the general election.

And even if Umno retains it, there is the question of whether it gleams or not.

The 1999 general election is a good example. Umno kept the crown but the shine was lost. Pas retained Kelantan, captured Terengganu, made major inroads in Kedah and tormented Umno in Pahang. It was then described as a Pyrrhic victory. Obviously, Umno does not want the next general election to be a repeat of 1999.

The Umno leadership has begun to remedy the errors of last time. It has decided to push the idea of new faces in the line-up, apart from getting the committees in Kelantan and Terengganu to play a more effective role as an Opposition.

Things seem to be moving, but the new faces campaign has made the party vulnerable.

"In Kelantan, some of the leaders who resented the new appointments are just short of sabotaging the party directly," said a top Umno leader's aide.

"Some are going out of their way to prove the new appointees are bad choices. And what better way than to ensure Umno fails to perform in Kelantan?"

"It is symptomatic of a party which has been in power for a long time," said an analyst.

The signs have not been missed by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. On Friday, when he launched the biography of Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim, one of Wanita Umno's longest serving heads, Dr Mahathir spoke about parochialism in Umno.

He said that during Fatimah's time, she contested in Jitra though she was from Johor.

"These days, people want candidates from their own house. If not then, it could be someone from the same kampung. Any further, they would not be accepted," the Prime Minister was quoted as saying.

But it seems so only for Umno candidates. Pas does not seem to face such problems. Neither does MCA, Umno's main partner in Barisan Nasional.

Another analyst argues that much as parochialism may be afflicting Umno only, it will become a Pas burden as it grows in stature.

"Pas was like Umno when it started. What was important in the beginning was to establish the party and to ensure it got support from the electorate."

However, as Umno established itself as the premier party in the nation, individual members began to want to establish themselves and that placed the party second in their order of priority.

"We have seen this happening in Kelantan Pas too. If in the 1995 general elections, Pas fielded Mohamed Sabu in Kubang Kerian, in 1999, Mohamed Sabu was sent back to Kedah and his place was taken by Husam Musa, a local

boy.

"Actually, parochialism in Umno is largely due to its own standing. Umno candidates expect to win and even if they lose, they believe they will be taken care of. So each division wants its own leaders to which they owe allegiance."

"In fact, sometimes, even a local Umno leader may not be accepted if he is not aligned with the division head."

The analyst said this is what gives division heads much bargaining power.

Gua Musang MP and Umno supreme council member Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah believes the problem can be resolved if the party returns to its "old ways" of selecting candidates.

"I believe we should go back to the branches. Let them propose who should be chosen for their constituencies."

It sounds democratic and very much in the tradition of Umno.

However, the snag is that some division leaders have total control over their branch leaders, either through patronage or their own stature, making it difficult to see the branches selecting candidates other than the division heads and those aligned to them. So the new faces campaign is made that much more difficult.

"But it boils down to the division leaders themselves. If they are sincere, then there should not be any problems in putting up new faces.

"After all, the division heads have been here, there and everywhere. They enjoyed support from the party at all levels when they took over the divisional leadership.

"Surely there should come a time for them to return the favour," said a top Umno leader.

It is as simple as that, but sincerity is not in the vocabulary of some division heads. Thus, it is probably time for Umno to consider limiting the terms of leaders at all levels.

As it is, certain factions in MCA are already pushing for the idea of limiting the term of the president. A non-political organisation such as the Young Malaysian Movement has in its constitution a term-limit for its president.

If it has worked in some developed nations, surely it can work for Umno and Malaysia, especially as some Umno leaders refuse to go even when the writing on the wall is clear.

Actually, Umno does not have much of a choice if it wants to make these changes. The only way is to make it a provision in the party constitution. Only then will the crown have a chance to shine in its full glory.

* shamsulmk@nstp.com.my