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The path to the future

HISTORY is not kind to idlers. It would be a mistake for Umno to celebrate its 57th anniversary without reflecting on its past. This applies to the nation as well: we need to remember where we came from because the path home is also the way to the future.

Umno, together with the other political parties representing the non-Malays, succeeded in bringing independence to the country because of the unity of the people. It was the undivided loyalty and support of the people that ensured the success and triumph of Umno's struggles. This is why it has often been said - but foolishly forgotten by some politicians and political careerists - that the political movement is, in the broadest sense, a social movement. Umno is not only a party for its card-carrying members but for all Malaysians.

Its presidents have therefore marked both the phases and turning points in the country's history. Dato' Onn Jaafar began the freedom struggle against the reviled Malayan Union; Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra fathered independence; Tun Abdul Razak Hussein initiated development and the socio-economic restructuring of the New Economic Policy; Tun Hussein Onn ushered in generational change; and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad shepherded the nation through rapid economic growth and industrialisation. Dr Mahathir's legacy must be preserved and enhanced by his successors.

If Umno had enjoyed great moral, ethical and spiritual strengths in the past, it is precisely because it did not forget the fact that it owed its existence, success and survival to the people. Without grassroots "people power", it would not have sprung to life. But some of its leaders and members alike treat politics in the narrow terms of electioneering - an attitude that has stripped Umno of some of its moral legitimacy. Politics must be a movement of ordinary people - not aspiring Yang Berhormats - politically active 365 days a year and not just during an election season. A relevant and progressive political party is built not just by running candidates. Umno must return to its past roots and become a dynamic movement that serves as a living and breathing part of the popular will.

Those engaged in internecine power struggles fail to see that power is never the property of the individual - no matter how high the office he occupies. Power belongs to the group - in this case, the Umno members - and remains as long as the group exists and stands united. And the moral, ethical, spiritual and political strengths of Umno depend on clean, progressive leaders and members who do not truckle and flatter the whims of their masters.

The reality is that Umno's political culture is under attack from within: the practice of money politics, abuse of power, poor leadership qualities and the subculture of factionalism. Personal agendas precede party interests to the point where the party is betrayed and the community subverted. As the nation's repository of power, Umno is seen as a gateway to fast riches, the wheels of fortune depending on the "right" buttons pushed.

Much has been said in the past on the need for Umno to restore its relevance. There have been improvements, no doubt. But do they suffice to replenish its past glory and guarantee itself as the dominant party in the future? When confronted with life-threatening challenges, both men and nations are presented with an opportunity for great clarity in their struggles, for great reawakening and to rescue the human spirit from the

arms of Morpheus through compassion, vision and active citizenship. Umno must rise to these challenges.