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Umno leaders need to get rid of the pettiness of thought

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PAS seems to have a fascination for the swine, an animal which Muslims find disgusting and beneath them to even mention.

The last time the animal became an issue in domestic politics was a few years ago during the height of culling them as they were believed to have spread Japanese Encephalitis (JE).

A Pas leader then had said that in the Arab world, a Badawi (bedouin) herds goats but in Malaysia, the Badawi is taking care of pigs.

The remarks were made in reference of the name of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who was then heading the Cabinet committee on the JE issue.

Now, Pas' official newsletter Harakah published two cartoons - one depicting a khinzir (pig) as the cause of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and the other depicting Dr Mahazir (the spelling rhymes with khinzir) with a snout as being the problem behind SAR (Sekolah Agama Rakyat or People's Religious School).

The caricatures incurred the wrath of other Umno leaders and MPs, some calling for Harakah's permit to be revoked.

But Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as in many other instances when he had been insulted, refused to give in to the demands, saying such action would mean that the Government was stooping to their level.

To some, such a stand may reflect the lack of firm handling of the issue. To others, it reflects the mind of a man who is secure and not prepared to allow such trivialities to distract him.

But the same cannot be said of all other Umno leaders. Some are so easily rattled by needlings or criticisms that their response does not reflect the position or standing they had achieved in their political pursuits. With that, the pettiness of thought becomes prevalent, negating efforts to ensure that Umno remains the premier political movement in the nation.

And it is this pettiness of thought which has given rise to selfish leaders who are only interested in positions despite their efforts in urging members to remain united and asking non-members to continue to support Umno.

Umno has, rightly or wrongly, been in the lives of every Malay in the country, regardless whether they are party members or non-members.

It is simply because Umno had managed to be a well-organised mass movement with chapters at all levels of society.

Over the years, some Umno leaders, at numerous levels had become complacent, some becoming arrogant upon getting top positions and others abusing their office.

No doubt, over the years too, many Umno leaders have emerged to show that they are there to serve the people and whatever political success they had achieved came from the people.

However, there are fears that such Umno leaders may be getting fewer.

But Umno as a whole is lucky in many ways. It has a proven track record and its top leadership had always been those who had proven that they were capable of carrying the party, community and nation forward.

With that, the "excess baggage" is scrutinised less because the top leadership continues to carry the torch.

Apart from that, Umno is also lucky as the nation, especially the Malay community, has no alternative body that can play a dominant role of being

the thrust of inter-racial and inter-religious co-operation.

Pas has, no doubt, over the years been trying to style itself as the alternative to Umno. It has even tried to establish a Barisan Nasional-like coalition via the Barisan Alternatif.

But it failed as its ideological and political style contrasted, if not contradicted that of its partners so much so that the Opposition coalition crumbled after the last general election of 1999.

With that, Pas and the remaining partner Parti Keadilan Rakyat (the entity after the merger of Keadilan and Parti Rakyat Malaysia) are seen as a coalition which is Malay-dominated and buoyed with strong conservative, if not extreme Islamic undertones.

That alone had given Umno and its partners in Barisan Nasional a major headstart in any election.

Dr Mahathir himself had repeatedly reminded party members that what would destroy Umno was their greed and complacency.

The question is how long can Umno members during the post-Dr Mahathir era ride on the fact that there is no viable alternative to the party apart from the nostalgic affection the Malay masses feel towards its role in the struggle for independence.

It can, of course, be argued that no one leader could have ensured the continued support for the party but at the same time, it cannot be denied that the ordinary, apolitical citizen tends to be influenced by what they perceive the leadership to be.

The post-Dr Mahathir Umno generation must also realise that less than a decade from now, most of the citizenry in position to be opinion makers will be those born after independence.

They do not carry the baggage of pre-independence nostalgia. Neither do they have much memories of the 1969 racial riots.

They are children who grew to be global citizens be it through their education or exposure.

They may share the sentiments that the West is not to be trusted but at the same time, they also see some values of the West as being positive for their well-being.

There is no way to stop the next generation from being individualistic, a common price for a nation which has achieved numerous economic successes.

It is against this backdrop that Umno will have to plod on in the post-Dr Mahathir era.

Although the scenario seems unfavourable to Umno, it has one thing on its side - it has the network at all levels of society.

What Umno needs to do is simply remind itself that it is a product of the masses and it owes its allegiance to them and not the other way round.

Another is to stop having the illusion that the power it gains is permanent and that it is a ticket to be arrogant.

Indeed, the masses need to be grateful for what Umno leaders had extended to them through their struggle. However, Umno leaders should also be mindful of the fact that it is the masses that entrusted them with the power.

All in all, Umno has not truly deviated from its objectives. But some leaders and members had reneged on the pledges made to the electorate.

But one bad apple will always affect others and if there are more than one bad apple, it is just a matter of time before the whole barrel turns bad, or perceived to be so.

It is then so true what Dr Mahathir said in his opening speech of the Umno general assembly yesterday, that it is Umno that can defeat Umno.

But to be able to ensure such thoughts from coming true, Umno will have to dismiss one value from its midst.

It is the pettiness of thought.