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Umno needs that old spirit

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ITS opponents gave Umno a short life expectancy. It is still the ruling party 57 years on, and getting stronger all the time, to the chagrin of its enemies. Last Sunday evening, I returned to Stadium Merdeka (whose construction I reported for this paper) where, on the morning of Aug 31, 1957, I witnessed the proclamation of independence by Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra. I joined more than 40,000 Umno members to celebrate its 57th anniversary.

It was a delight. The stadium had been enlarged, then abandoned, and restored and embraced as suddenly as it was repudiated.

Every young reporter hungers for the big story. I didn't expect to get anywhere near one so soon. But a few months after I joined The Straits Times, at the age of 19, I was lumped together with virtually the entire reporters pool to cover the biggest story of all - the country's independence from British rule. I was too young to do much more than act as runner for my seniors, but I ran hard with the flow of copy and history-making, and with the massive excitement and jubilation of the occasion.

I have looked back on that day innumerable times, always at a loss for words. I remember the rush of adrenaline, my editors barking orders, indelible snapshots of crowds of people heading towards freedom; the slow motion lowering of the Union Jack; the raising of the Malaysian stripes and crescent; the singing of the British anthem for the last time and Negara Ku for the first. What I felt is indescribable. My elation was comparable to having received the greatest gift of my life - the gift of a nation to call my own.

Merdeka was my first defining moment, as it was, I believe, for my entire generation. The proclamation took place at the purpose-built 20,000-capacity Stadium Merdeka, which cost the then grand sum of RM2 million. It was the biggest thing the people who thronged in from the length and breadth of the country had ever seen.

The memory of that day came to mind as I beheld Umno's 57th anniversary celebration at the stadium, since expanded to seat 50,000, and filled up to the bleachers with the party's rank and file. The reminiscence was not incidental or even nostalgic - every major Umno celebration is and must be measured against the achievement of independence, the party's greatest glory.

Young people will accuse me, and perhaps Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, of being stuck or even trapped in the past. But only the past, and a sharp awareness of history, can provide the foundations on which the future is built. Umno is nothing without its past. And this is where there is a yawning generational gap between the young and old or, I should say, the pre- and post-Independence age brackets. If the divide is not bridged, and the party's future not reconciled with its past, Umno will languish along with the tolerant and pluralistic nation that it built. If Umno, the party of the middle ground, fails, the way will be open to the demagogues at the extremes.

The point that is often missed by the present and rather large crop of party careerists is this: Umno's power does not emanate from or depend on patronage and the granting of favours or any other strategem to win votes. Its power lies in its ability to galvanise and transform the Malays and, by extension, all Malaysians.

The most historic transformation burst out shortly after the end of World War II and culminated on Merdeka Day. Orientalist and colonial scholars' and administrators' descriptions of the Malays testify to the size of this transformation, indeed I would not be amiss in calling it a mental revolution. Under the prejudice of imperialism, they were thought of as "nature's gentlemen", forever docile, subservient and content with serfdom as long as the basic elements of their culture and religion were satisfied.

Protest against the Malayan Union - and the formation of Umno in 1946 to articulate popular opposition to the British-imposed plan - awoke the Malays from centuries of colonially encumbered slumber. This is too casually understated today.

But for me, the sight of the spontaneous joyous masses at Merdeka was aweinspiring and unforgettable. They had come on their own, in buses and trains and on foot. They stayed with relatives and friends in Kampung Baru, the Malay ghetto serving the British administrative capital and its commercial interests, and slept or camped in the wooden mosques (except for the Masjid Jamek), surau, schools and five-foot ways. They shouted themselves hoarse echoing Tengku Abdul Rahman's declaration of "Merdeka!"

On Sunday, the crowds had been bussed in on air-conditioned coaches, not a few in glittering limousines, by Umno's well-oiled logistics machinery. The applause was, well, polite and at times as if cued; few were spontaneous. There were fireworks, music and much pageantry.

The party's bigwigs smiled benignly - Umno had put on a good show and it was fitting that a celebration of 57 years of struggle had taken place at the venue of the nation's birth.

Instead of remembrance, however, Stadium Merdeka could so easily have stood for forgetfulness (as Dr Mahathir has said, Melayu mudah [dan cepat] lupa). It was taken over by a Malay conglomerate, which consigned it for demolition, and then held in limbo when the owners got into financial trouble. The Government stepped in to save it. Even now, there are vigorous arguments about what to do with it. The conservationists are frequently accused of being soft-hearted and sentimental.

I hope the stadium will not turn into a parable for either Umno or the country's attitude to its history. But there are disconcerting parallels: a monument to a big idea almost torn asunder by big money; a sudden rush to rescue the past; and then a bafflement over how to relate that past to the present or the future.

I say the Government must preserve the stadium, promulgate it as a national treasure and prevent its ransoming to the megaringggit.

Sentimental or not, I cannot help but compare August 1957 with Umno's 57th anniversary. The party must regain the lifeblood that nourished and lofted it into the stadium 46 years ago. It must redeem its formative spirit, its concept and ideal of struggle. The story I witnessed at the beginning of my last teen year must continue to be written, the narrative of achievement and success continued.

It must not be forgotten that Malaysia is the exception rather than the norm in the uncertain fortunes of the post-colonial Third World. The fight for independence and the preservation of its rights and identity, against foes both inside and outside the country, has not yet been won. There is still a long struggle ahead to stay comfortably afloat and realise the nation's potential as a modern, liberal, industrialised and First World Muslim state.

The British did not think that the new Federation of Malaya would be viable. They thought new forms of threat would arise from internal dissent and external force. They were not incorrect - the risk of backsliding, of an unwitting surrender to pressure and domination, is as present today as

it was then.

What I saw in the quickly refurbished stadium was impressive, no doubt. But it was nothing compared to the euphoria that was displayed there 46 years ago. There is an urgent need to excite and capture young minds and release new dynamism in Malaysian politics for Umno to sustain itself.

Umno must quickly harness the diverse energies of young Malaysians. It has, I think, done well with Puteri Umno. But this is not enough. The party must hold a mirror to the crowning glory of Independence and once again galvanise and transform the people.

Umno has raised the hopes and expectations of the Malays and Bumiputera. It has to capture the new Malays that they have become.