

**'Umno methods need overhaul'**  
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EXCLUSIVE Much has been said about the new generation of Umno leaders. The likes of Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar, his right hand man Razali Ibrahim and Nur Jazlan Mohamed have been called "broadminded", "liberal" and even "revolutionary".

But years before they started hogging the limelight with witty posts on micro-blogging website Twitter, current supreme council member Saifuddin Abdullah had been making his party counterparts squirm with his hard-hitting views.

ahmad shabery cheek 041108 01Often termed as the opposition man inside Umno, the deputy higher education minister has no qualms engaging with Pakatan Rakyat representatives in televised debates or forums, long before Anwar Ibrahim made it cool in his extravaganza with then information minister Ahmad Shabery Cheek (left).

Saifuddin knows that he may not be the most popular person in Umno, but that is not stopping him from criticising and calling for transformation when the very mention of it may seem like a bad word to his colleagues in the 64-year-old party.

In the second part of an exclusive interview with Malaysiakini, Saifuddin laments his frustration with the unshakeable system of political patronage that has been plaguing Umno, as well as how the party can gain the support of the non-Malays that seem to have deserted them.

'Umno is not without ideology'

Only an Umno member since 2001, the Temerloh MP can be considered a lightweight in political years. But in less than a decade the former youth activist has shot up the party ladder, winning a parliamentary seat in his first general election in 2008 and finally becoming a deputy minister.

Yet the 49-year-old mild-mannered father of one is relentless in urging for more 'political thought' in the party.

"Umno is not a party without ideology or characteristics since its formation. Since Day One, it has strived for Malay nationalism and to uphold Islam. But it has to look beyond that. It must have political thought, it must serve the needs of contemporary society.

NONE"Umno likes to use the phrase 'developmental politics', but have you heard of it actually being discussed?" asked Saifuddin (right).

He also chided his colleagues, who seem yet to grasp the art of skilful rebuttal and debate, especially when the party comes under attack from the opposition.

"It saddens me when the opposition criticised the Malaysia Plans, and asked why is there a five-year plan all the time. They implied that it was an archaic way for development, and that it was a remnant of the communist era.

"I didn't hear any rebuttal from Umno, even when the attack was on the framework of the Malaysia Plan!," he said.

'Time to persuade, not disseminate'

Calling for an overhaul of Umno methods, Saifuddin - who is a former university debater - said that it was time to persuade, instead of simply disseminating information.

"There is no answer when there are calls for debate. I don't blame people sitting on the fence who think that the opposition is more articulate. We just have not attempted enough anyway," he said.

He also said that it was time for Umno to discard their mindset that winning elections is just about politics.

"It is about administering public service. But at the same time, it goes beyond serving the needs of the constituency or getting the basic infrastructure up and running.

"People want to be involved in decision-making. There is a whole debate about the delivery system, but the problem may not be in the delivery. We may be delivering the wrong thing," he said.

After being elected as MP, Saifuddin became the first representative to jump on the KPI bandwagon, giving himself several Key Result Areas to achieve in his constituency.

But when putting the party's own internal mechanism of politics under the microscope, Saifuddin, who often calls himself a "reluctant politician", said that more can be done.

Hinting on the prevalent system of patronage, he said that candidates for elections are often fielded for the wrong reasons.

"How I wish I could change the system, where someone who wants to offer himself to be a candidate must do so through proper party elections," he said, citing the US system of having an open race between party colleagues to be fielded.

NONE "You get a better pool of candidates, and that they get elected based on the position that they hold dearly and feel strongly about, instead of him or her getting elected because he's a nice guy, or that he's better looking, or because he is simply in the good books of the party presidency," the former youth leader said.

But when asked whether he is already jaded, having seen the system from the inside, Saifuddin approached the topic almost cautiously.

"Now that I am a member of the Umno supreme council, I can use the meetings to voice my views. Of course it's behind closed doors, but I can freely expose things and convince the Umno leadership on matters," he said.

Before ending the interview, Saifuddin said: "We are moving, but slowly."

"More transformation has already been done by the Prime Minister. But I hope that there is also transformation by the party, for the party."

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