

No 2 fight: Discomfiting parallels to Umno
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COMMENT Even before nominations have begun to trickle in, the looming race for the deputy president's post in PKR has drawn parallels to past contests in Umno.

One would think PKR bigwigs would bend over backwards to avoid such comparisons; anything to do with Umno must be taboo for a party bent on undoing its adversary's misdeeds.

But the parallel-drawing was the work of an expected contestant in the upcoming race: Zaid Ibrahim.

It was Zaid who compared himself to the hapless Ghafar Baba in the 1993 contest for Umno's No 2 post, when the incumbent was drowned by the deluge of nominations for his challenger, Anwar Ibrahim.

azlanThe comparison was ill-considered. Ghafar was a poor No 2 and Umno could not have been serious if it wanted to elevate him to No 1. Thus Anwar was a shoo-in, a tad impatient, one could say.

Yes, the race made for cruel sport: an elderly party stalwart was publicly humiliated. But whoever said politics is a dirty business was not just referring to the tactics often employed in its quest; it also alludes to the injustice of the fate suffered by those who deserved better.

If Zaid was minded to draw comparisons to past Umno battles, the 1981 contest between favourite Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and outsider Musa Hitam would have been more useful.

The savvy Musa ran a brilliant outsider's race: he comported himself humbly, treaded the waters astutely, and waited for the frontrunner to make all the mistakes. A presumptuous Razaleigh, seemingly unassailable in the early running, obliged.

Today's adversaries, tomorrow's allies

There's another reason why Zaid ought to find the 1981 parallel instructive. Musa and Razaleigh, bitter rivals in 1981 and then again in 1984, combined in 1987 to unseat Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Only the tin-eared would be deaf to history's capacity to engender repeats of its ironies: today's adversaries could become tomorrow's allies.

When it is considered that it's not only Chandra Muzaffar that feels Anwar Ibrahim would be an "unmitigated disaster" as prime minister (Chandra was quoted to that effect days before the March 8, 2008 general election), that there are presently people in PKR pushing Zaid's candidature who feel the same, the stage is set for Zaid to tread the waters lightly and farsightedly.

Today's rivals can be tomorrow's running mates to upend yesterday's patrons.

Thus for Zaid, the drawing of misleading parallels, decrying the dirty tactics of opponents, touting victimhood - these are un-Musa, circa 1981 tactics. Better for Zaid to compose

himself the way he did in Johor Baru last week when he dialogued with 65 PKR representatives from the Pasir Gudang, Johor Baru, Pulai, Tebrau, Gelang Patah and Kota Tinggi divisions.

He cautioned that in the party's just-commenced election exercise PKR must not replicate the vices characteristic of Umno which the party is determined to rid the Malaysian body politic.

'Is he one of us?'

When this week started with a majority of PKR MPs announcing that they backed Azmin Ali for the deputy president's post, citing the man's "loyalty" to the party's struggle as principal reason for their endorsement, one felt that Zaid's caution uttered in Johor Baru was appropriately premonitory.

musa hitam wief launch 191006 doorstepThree years ago, Musa Hitam aired his views on the issue of Umno's decline, months before the results of the 12th general election attested the eclipse.

He recalled that when he started out in Umno politics in the 1960s, the common query directed at a newcomer was: "Can he work? Is he able to deliver?" Musa said that by the time of Dr Mahathir Mohamad's premiership, the question had mutated - "Is he one of us? Will he be loyal?"

In Umno's case, alterations to the criterion of suitability took place over a 40-to-50 year span.

The wise would not disparage loyalty as a virtue in a political party's arduous struggle, even if they take due cognisance of Dr Samuel Johnson's famed caution: "Patriotism (read loyalty) is the last refuge of scoundrels."

But if loyalty becomes the principal criterion for elevation to the penultimate echelon of the party, it is certain PKR will not take as long as Umno to decline.

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