

Umno's fixation on the 30 percent
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COMMENT Every time an Umno general assembly rolls into town, the mainstream newspapers will be filled to overflowing with coverage of the event. Pages and pages will be devoted to the speeches and debates as well as photographs of the gathering.

But if you were to dig up your old newspapers of at least the past two or three decades to refer to the reports on the Umno general assemblies, you'd find that the basic issues and the exhortations of the party leaders are virtually the same.

At each assembly, the things that are said appear to be variations on the same themes - the Malays need to work harder and improve themselves; they need to be on guard against external threats; their rights will never be taken away from them; Umno will forever protect the Malays; at the same time, the Malays must understand that they live in a multi-racial society so Umno will also see to the interests of the other races...

There is always a heavy emphasis on the issue of race, and of the Malays in relation to the other races in Malaysia. Somehow, even though it is the dominant party in government, Umno can't seem to get past that and focus instead on national issues that affect the entire population or discuss intelligently the issues of the day from a broader perspective.

Its president would utter some platitude about Umno having to show leadership and be sensitive to the other races, and then stridently champion the Malay Agenda. As the president has also always been the country's prime minister, you'd have to look at the assembly as theatre, the president as an actor, to suppress any suspicion of schizophrenia.

Imagine this happening in Singapore, with the ruling party there championing Chinese supremacy. Or the ruling party in Australia championing the whites. Not so easy, is it?

The Hokkiens might say of the 2010 Umno General Assembly proceedings that it was all "kong lai, kong kee, kong siang mi knia." (transliterated: Talk come, talk go, talk same things.) This is something Umno's permanent chairman, Badruddin Amiruldin, can probably relate to; after all, when he told MCA president Chua Soi Lek, "Please don't disturb the 30 percent which belongs to the Malays", he did so in Hokkien.

More than that, his remark aptly summed up the theme and tenor of the assembly - the party's fixation on the 30 percent. It didn't matter to all present that Badruddin should instead have said that the 30 percent belongs to the 'bumiputeras'. The significant difference was significantly overlooked, but hey! when they're all imbued by the same party spirit, who cares about the details?

Institutionalising cronyism

Going by the quality of this year's debates and the proposals of some delegates, Umno has not changed a bit. If a party member had been transported from the 1980s into the 2010 assembly, he would have felt quite at home.

Umno vice-president Mohd Shafie Apdal said some sensible things about the need to be inclusive and not be jealous of the success of others. So did Khairy Jamaluddin when he expressed the need to appreciate the feelings of the other races for whom Malaysia is also

their home and their country.

"We often hear grouses about the civil service being dominated by Malays," he said. "Are we to believe that there are only a few non-Malays who are qualified to hold senior civil service positions?"

Many at the assembly, however, took the non-inclusive stance and in so doing provided some entertainment, albeit unwittingly.

Former Sabah chief minister Salleh Said Keruak said there should not be open tenders for government projects. Instead, contracts should be given to Umno leaders' followers. And this must be ensured by the setting-up of a system. Talk about institutionalising cronyism!

Johor delegate Ayub Jamil wanted affirmative action included in all the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) initiatives announced by the government. If that were done, how would the private sector be attracted to invest in them? What about foreign investors? Wouldn't they prefer countries that don't impose such a condition?

Malacca delegate Hasnor Sidang Hussein actually blamed the non-Malays for the failure of the Malays to achieve the 30 percent - by not providing the Malays help in this regard. But was that ever part of the deal? Since it's not, why don't we write a new 'social contract' and put that clause in?

Reezal Merican Naina Merican from Penang called for BN component parties to show Umno fairness and justice. Now, that was sumptuous. Fairness and justice from these powerless partners who can't say anything that Umno doesn't like without being told to shut up?

How have they been unfair and unjust to Umno? Oh, is it about Chua Soi Lek questioning the 30 percent? It's always about the 30 percent, isn't it? That's not just what the Umno General Assembly revolved around; it seems the whole world does, too. Questioning the 30 percent is unfair and unjust.

Negeri Sembilan representative Jalaluddin Alias blamed Umno's partners in BN for the coalition's poor showing in the 2008 general election. To him, Umno was above blame because it managed to win 68 percent of its seats. It was evidently immaterial to him that in 2008, Umno lost 30 of the parliamentary seats it had held before that. Those losses must have been the fault of the component parties as well.

For the next general election, he urged the Umno leadership to take away the seats lost by its coalition partners in 2008 and give them instead to Umno candidates. This, he said, would ensure a BN victory. Hallelujah! Yes, indeed!

Yet even as he showed no quarter for the component parties, he acknowledged that "if MCA doesn't support us, we cannot win". So, let's get this right - take away their seats and still ask for their support? What do you call someone who comes from Klinggong and who exhibits a twisted logic?

Strong graphic language

Numerous other delegates defended the government's recently announced projects. They seemed to speak through more than one orifice.

Among these was Umno Youth deputy chief Razali Ibrahim who said mega-projects like the

proposed 100-storey Warisan Merdeka tower would help Malaysia become a high-income nation because they would attract funding from the private sector and thereby help the government save money, which it could then use to solve the people's problems.

Brilliant! And would he be the one who will guarantee the participation of the private sector? And also see that the money saved is channelled towards the needy?

Let's save the best for last. This year, Umno president Najib Razak came out strongly to defend the rights of the Malays. He assured them that their rights were enshrined in the federal constitution, and these could not be easily taken away from them because any amendment to the related article would have to get the consent of the rulers. He said the chapter on the rights issue was now closed and there should be no more questioning of it.

To be sure, there is absolutely no mention of 'rights' in the federal constitution. So it was another significant difference that was significantly overlooked, but when the actor is in the mood for a theatre performance, who cares about the details?

All this is really old hat. The surprising element is that what Najib said about defending Malay rights totally contradicts his 1Malaysia concept and the inclusiveness it advocates. But it's theatre, and he's performing to a Malay audience. Why not, eh? Why is there a need to be consistent, anyway? Especially when you are the leader of the most powerful party in the country?

And while you're at it, why not use strong graphic language to rally party members to maintain control of the government after the next general election, no matter what: "Even if our bodies are crushed and our lives lost, brothers and sisters, whatever happens, we must defend Putrajaya."?

Did somebody say this was a statement advocating violence? Rubbish! In fact, it was so unimportant it was omitted in mainstream media reports. *Malaysiakini* was, however, not discerning enough and decided to run it, so the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) had to investigate the news website. Probably to find out if *Malaysiakini* was qualified to make sound editorial judgements.

But the *Straits Times* of Singapore reported it, too. So how? Now it looks like Najib's unimportant statement will be read in other countries, too, because the *Straits Times* is an influential paper. Will potential foreign investors be confused about which the real Najib is - the one who is global-minded and assures them of a level investment field or the one who talks about crushed bodies and lost lives?

What about local investors? Will they now be inspired to strongly support the ETP? Will they be filled with confidence that no matter what, the government will not change, the political situation will be stable, and investments will be safe?

Well, it looks like the 2010 Umno General Assembly has been another reaffirmation of business as usual, and that all's well with the Umno empire. The racial policies will remain, regardless of the ETP and the New Economic Model (NEM). It's all back to status quo. And Putrajaya is guaranteed.

No wonder former president Mahathir Mohamad said, "It feels like the Umno of old." Coming from someone who brought the country to where it is, that's really ominous.

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