

Najib, beware the ides of March
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Umno has been deprived of moral and historical functions.

After five years of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's unsubstantial leadership, the party which was born to fight British attempt to turn all Malaya into a crown colony has become "rotten at the core".

This remark and conclusion, made by disciplinary committee head Tengku Ahmad Rithaudeen, hits the nail right on the head.

While it would be a happy hum-along tune for Najib Abdul Razak who will become Umno president and prime minister at the end of March next year, Umno is sadly saddled with a gigantic internal corruption.

Facing deep global recession, the party is now having to reach into its heart for what's left of an historical mission and ethical purpose to continue being relevant to the Malays.

Ahmad Rithaudeen is charged with responsibility for disciplinary action against 'money politics' in Umno, the vote-buying and vote-selling that's making it a market place for political aspirants who are rich to gain power without political effort or talent.

The disease, which erupted about two decades before, reared its head again from the moment Abdullah Ahmad Badawi took over from Dr Mahathir Mohamad in November 2003.

Abdullah's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, a newcomer to politics, intervened in party and government and became No 2 in Umno Youth by allegedly rewarding contestants who then pulled out.

Abdullah was hauled into national prominence as 'Mr Clean'. The irony and stark contrast of Mr Clean and Dirty Politics is probably not a matter of nature but a straight character of incompetence, or non-substantial leadership that's now lazily sauntering to a finish by end of March.

It's a date that's bad simply because it will take time to come, says his predecessor Mahathir.

There was and is an audible sigh of relief when it was decided Abdullah would not stay on after March. But the question many are asking is why he should even stay on after December, when the party general assembly was originally scheduled to be held.

Abdullah ought to go. Japan has fallen into recession. Commodity prices have fallen from US\$147 a barrel of oil to less than US\$60, and still falling.

Palm oil, which directly affects a large number of Malaysian farmers and workers, has fallen below the critical price-level of RM1,500 per tonne to around RM1,450. It is expected to go down some 46 percent more by the middle of next year.

Also, there will be about 300,000 unemployed Malaysians coming home from Singapore alone.

What's Abdullah doing about all this? He is doing nothing.

Instead, he has insisted on staying in office for an extra three months from December simply to read Bills in Parliament that will introduce a Judicial Appointments Commission, an independent Anti-Corruption Agency and three others in a state of an economic meltdown that is expected to be the worst Malaysia has endured.

Abdullah can stay for the three months if premier-elect Najib is given the free hand he needs to quickly put in place the stimulus and fall-back packages the country will require. We should have already begun counter-trading, for instance.

But how can Najib act freely and take full responsibility to usher in new policies and to change structures if he is still No 2?

'Greasing of palms'

Umno reacted to the stresses of party and nation with remarkable somnolence during the recent divisional meetings that nominated Najib as party president without contest.

In more than half of the divisions, it is learned that the members just came and went, leaving the halls and the speeches delivered inside merely a bout of stout words mainly for old men and women.

These oldies came with the belief that the party they love is still the same one they had known before. But it is not.

Umno is now a ruling party of a successful commercial and industrial nation. In the transition, moral integrity in the party simply slid off, leaving the idealism in a slough of despond.

Moral integrity has virtually caved in within Umno, leaving a bleeding wound that can only be medicated by 'money politics'.

The newly enriched in the party were known to have spent more than RM2 million for the top position at divisional level. Some took vote-bearers on trips abroad until the eve of the elections so opponents could not reach them.

They have neither been purged from the party nor disciplined. Umno members are now asking if there has been collusion, negligence or a blind spot at the top all along.

In the March 8 general election, many party members allegedly refused to work unless their palms were greased. When that was done, some branch and divisional leaders complained that the payments amounted to chicken-feed.

The party paid dearly. The Barisan Nasional lost five states and, in effect, one federal territory, and a lot of members were happy with the outcome.

Umno was not facing an internal revolution. Rather, it was internal revulsion that had caused the party to bleed profusely in elections.

Abdullah has come to be seen not only as an incompetent leader but a corrupt one as well.

His family and some friends have blatantly become ultra-rich.

They have become multi-millionaires - his father, son, son-in-law, brother, brother-in-law, cronies and - according to Mahathir - also sycophants.

Mahathir himself had enriched his children and his cronies, Abdullah retorted, calling his nemesis a 'Ten Percenter'.

The rot at the core of the party has become debilitating. Umno has lost moral purpose.

Najib's choice

The question before Najib is: how can the party recover its moral and historical motives? Alternatively, should he rule as a member of an oligarchy comprising of the ultra-rich in Umno and in Malaysia?

Umno is not ideological and neither is it strongly Islamic, like PAS. Will Najib turn in a rule of a triumvirate with his cousin Hishammuddin Hussein (left) and Mahathir's son, Mukhriz (right), for a powerful mix of kickapoo to overcome the problems of ideological and moral lack in the party?

But that would put Mahathir in the Big Man's shoes, but he too faces accusations that he has ruined the integrity of the judiciary as well.

This is what Najib will have to resolve along with the impact of terrible global stagflation (recession with inflation) that has already set and will quickly worsen, with no solution in sight.

Alongside systematic breakdown of the world financial order, there is systematic moral depreciation in Umno and a certain erosion of party morale that Najib will have to somehow restore.

Which way he navigates once he is in power will finally determine whether or not the majority of the Malays will want Umno, or go to PAS instead.

People will not be impressed by a simple communal pretence. Being ultra-Malay is of no value.

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