

Umno faces danger of dying from old habits
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Umno leaders have recently thrown out the gauntlet for reform but one wonders if it is easier said than done. Reform requires radical change in mindset and conduct, as prime minister-in-waiting Najib Abdul Razak rightly stated.

But if recent responses of Umno ministers to the Kugan murder and reports of human trafficking by Malaysian uniformed officials are any indication, changing some Umno leaders' mindsets poses a real challenge - maybe even a 'mission impossible'.

In contrast, Pak Lah's response to the US Senate committee foreign relations investigating the allegations of Malaysian selling refugees into sex slavery is commendable. Unlike his foreign minister who was typically defensive, untactful and unhelpful, he showed diplomacy.

'Baseless, ridiculous and far-fetched' said an irate Foreign Minister Rais Yatim but those words may yet return to haunt him when the evidence is presented. At least Pak Lah did the responsible thing and asked to see the report.

With Pak Lah's imminent departure, though he compromised on reforms, who is left to lead the reform charge? We saw former Umno minister Zaid Ibrahim initiate reform, even radically advocating the repeal of the ISA, but it resulted disastrously in his swift political demise. Umno didn't want change so why now?

Ironically, the men who could have helped Umno have left or are leaving the troubled ship. And Umno leaders are now desperately warning, 'change or perish.' Reform is no longer an option but a 'do-or-die' desperate act.

Even as it tries to change Umno faces a dilemma of reform. There are too many skeletons in the Umno closet and buried under the carpet from 51 years of mostly unaccounted for deeds, for a start. If reform involves transparency and public accountability and close scrutiny of past deeds, Umno leaders may as well start writing the party's epitaph.

That's why reform will pose a dilemma and Umno will face many conflicts of interest. Is it prepared to place principles above personal interests? This is mainly the result of Dr Mahathir Mohamad's twenty-two year legacy. A tainted legacy of abuse and misuse of power, and unprincipled practices that destroyed the independence of the country's democratic institutions.

Pak Lah's failure at radical reform has left the system virtually unchanged. Some of the actors have changed but it is the same old script written by Mahathir himself, the same old template of political chauvinism. We reap what we sow, do we not?

The country has for a long time been in the grip of the Umno octopus but this grip is loosening as the threat of widespread electoral defeat looms, after two straight losses so soon after March 8, 2008 when Umno and its allies lost five state governments to the Pakatan Rakyat, a viable alternative government in the making. Thus, the Umno call for reform is serious.

So when Umno leaders talk of reform to save the party, will they dismantle the system of

political patronage and money politics that have kept them in power? Will the judiciary, the police, and the bureaucracy function by rule of law that demands independence, transparency and accountability?

Will judges be free of political interference? Will the police take orders only from their superiors in the force who themselves are free of political patronage? Will the civil servants do their jobs according to government guidelines and not take orders from the politicians except their minister? Will the media be free from control by licensing and government directives? Will the ISA be abolished?

Until there are clear answers, reform appears a mirage. What works against Umno is its dismal past in making successful and positive reforms.

Then there is also the need for police reform pertaining to custodial deaths. The latest death in custody should be the last straw. A young innocent Indian youth, A Kugan was murdered and there was a cover up but for the intervention of family members, friends and politicians doing their job.

Then, the lack of an independent judiciary means that there is no fair trial and government authority goes unchecked. In practical terms, this means that when a prisoner is killed, those responsible are free to wash their hands of responsibility, as there is no third agency demanding accountability.

These are the skeletons in the closet that reform must not overlook. When a royal commission into police procedures recommended the creation of the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi faltered.

If the government is serious about reform it can't ignore calls for the IPCMC to be established because it is obvious the police force is in a terrible state.

Government ministers that make gaffes, silly statements and display a lack of respect for the public need to reform their manners and be reminded that their position is not a licence to abuse the public.

In reforming for human rights, the government ought to face no dilemma - but you never know. When the latest allegations implicating Malaysian law enforcers including Rela members colluding with their Thai counterparts in crimes of human trafficking of Burmese refugees for sex slavery, anything is possible. And mind you many of these poor victims are Muslims.

Reform is a dilemma but not reforming is committing political sepukku.

But from the hostile and defensive responses of government ministers to the Kugan murder and US Senate foreign relations committee studying allegations of human trafficking by Malaysian officials, reform may be easier said than done.

Old habits die hard and Umno faces the danger of dying from old habits unless it succeeds at reform.