

Stop doublespeak and playing to the gallery

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Of late, several politicians have been raising race-based issues. CHOW KUM HOR finds out why they turn to ethnic politics.

A LITTLE-KNOWN organisation was set up in the 1960s to offer an alternative to race-based politics.

Admo, or the Alliance Direct Membership Organisation, was the Alliance's option for those in favour of the ruling coalition but did not wish to join any of its mono-ethnic component parties — Umno, MCA and MIC.

Admo, not surprisingly, turned out to be a four-letter word. "People were not interested and even the Alliance parties were not supportive.

"In the end, it failed to take off," says historian Prof Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim.

Then, as now, championing of race issues would flare up intermittently to varying degrees. Recently, such rhetoric from politicians made the rounds again.

The latest started with calls by some Umno leaders for the Penang chief minister's post to be rotated. Then came Umno Youth vice-head Khairy Jamaluddin's statement that the Chinese could take advantage of Umno's weaknesses.

Even before the other political parties' rebuttals had subsided, a fresh controversy erupted: The row between Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein (of Umno) and Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Ong Tee Keat (of MCA) over whether funds for repairs at a Chinese school in Muar, Johor, had been misused.

Over the years, the war of words usually starts with a politician making a statement that appeals to one ethnic group — complaining, for example, that Malays in a particular state have been marginalised economically.

This creates an opportunity for another ethnic stalwart, say a Chinese leader, to claim the Chinese too are being left out in other states.

In the end, leaders from both groups think they have become "heroes" in their own communities, creating a win-win situation — as far as short-term gains are concerned.

Interestingly, the same people pay lip-service to national integration when they meet their counterparts from other



Dr Chua says leaders must play by the rules

ethnic-based parties. "Doublespeak happens all the time. So much so, you just don't know, deep down, what these politicians believe in anymore," says Khoo.

Khoo, one of the architects of the Rukun Negara, says in the 1960s and 1970s, politicians were less inclined to compare races, whether in economic achievements or participation in sporting events.

Universiti Sains Malaysia political scientist Prof Syed Ahmad Hussein says the Labour Party, despite being Chinese-dominated, took on issues from a non-racial perspective in its heyday.

"As a socialist party, it (the Labour Party) was very much issue-based. The issues were tackled from a non-racial perspective although there were perceptions that it was a Chinese party," said Syed Ahmad.

But why is it that after almost half a century of Independence, politicians still fall back on the racial card with impunity?

Pressure from grassroots party members is one reason, says Pulau Umno division chief Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed.

"Sometimes, pressure from the grassroots can be very intense," says the Pulau Member of Parliament. "They are very concerned about issues like the economy. It is not a matter of playing to the gallery. We have to be seen to be voicing the grassroots' concerns."

That is why politicians find it easier — and faster — to climb the political ladder by harping on issues such as *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance),



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Chinese schools or the demolition of Hindu temples.

Notes Khoo: "If you don't support any one group, they may all not support you. But if you fight for one group, at least that one group will support you."

In the scheme of things political, every issue — even seemingly "non-racial" ones such as poverty eradication or fighting corruption — can be manipulated along racial lines.

There is also an economic dimension to the political stakes. Historically, politicians tend to play the ethnic game more frequently when the economy hits a rough patch, says Khoo.

The racial riots in 1969 took place at a time when the income gap between Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras was widening, he says.

Although a recurring and predictable theme in the country's otherwise harmonious political arrangement, racial issues strike a discordant note.

"It is sad that after 49 years of Independence, many politicians still cannot look beyond racially-tinted lenses," laments Syed Ahmad. While politicians may gain instant fame from becoming racial champions, this brand of politics breeds suspicion among different ethnic groups, he says.

This is why some yearn for a new model for Malaysian politics. Gerakan's Puchong MP Lau Yeng Peng says as radical as it sounds, it is time to seriously consider disbanding the component parties in Barisan Nasional in favour of having one multi-racial party.

But in a country where eth-

nic politics is so deeply entrenched, Lau's proposal remains, at best, premature.

"But we have to start somewhere," argues Syed Ahmad. "Let's move away from race-based to issues-based."

For example, he sees some political parties' efforts to help good students, regardless of race, gain entry into public universities as a positive step.

MCA vice-president Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek says those who play with "racial fire" are actually burning the candle at both ends. "You cannot be a racial champion and hope to be a national leader at the same time."

One example is former Umno Youth vice-head Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir. At the height of the Suqiu-Umno standoff in 2000 over the former's 1999 election appeals, Aziz led a delegation of party Youth leaders to the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, threatening to raze the building.

"I know the Chinese have never really forgiven him for the incident," says Nur Jazlan. "You can either be a racial leader or a national leader. Not both."

Nur Jazlan, whose constituency is made up of roughly equal numbers of Malays and non-Malays, admits having to tread a fine line by not bending backwards too much to appeal to one race at the expense of the other.

But Health Minister Dr Chua believes striking a balance is not difficult if component party leaders "play by the rules". The problem, he adds, is when overly ambitious leaders take matters to the Press to gain immediate popularity instead of raising them behind closed doors.

Nur Jazlan says: "Within Umno, I have to meet certain expectations of the grassroots. I do what I can but if I pander too much to them, then I am not a leader. If I do that, then they (the grassroots) are leading, not me."

Khoo laments that not many politicians are brave enough to make decisions unpopular with the ethnic group on whom they depend for support.

That is why, for better or worse, Khoo believes race will continue to be one of the main features in Malaysian politics.