

## **Umno's 60th Anniversary: Living as one family under one roof**

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The entry of different ethnic groups into Umno has enriched the party and its programmes. Some of its newer members tell SANTHA OORJITHAM about life "under one roof".

FORTY per cent of the members of Umno Youth's Penampang division in Sabah are Chinese. Chief Jeremy Wong says the division celebrates not only Hari Raya Aidilfitri but Chinese New Year, Kaamatan and Christmas as well.

Choo Endinprat heads one of 10 Umno branches for people of Thai origin in Padang Terap division in Kedah.

The rubber smallholder and wholesaler says they are "under one roof" in the party with Malays and Chinese.

"We can live as one family. We have no problems, no issues."

In Pekan, Pahang, Rashid Ka heads one of 14 Orang Asli Umno branches. The administrator at Universiti Tenaga Nasional's Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah campus says the party is "more open" now than in 1951, when its members opposed founder president Datuk Onn Jaafar's attempt to open Umno to non-Malay members.

Today, the 60-year-old party counts some Orang Asli, Chinese, people of Thai origin and non-Muslim Bumiputeras in Sabah among its members.

Although Umno's members are predominantly Muslim, some are followers of Buddhism, Christianity and the traditional religion (agama adat) of many Orang Asli.

They say Umno has provided an effective platform for their concerns, while analysts note the party has become more inclusive.

The landmark was 1991, when Umno moved into Sabah after Usno was dissolved. That year, Sabah Umno sent 220 delegates to the General Assembly in Kuala Lumpur.

Some party stalwarts were uneasy about the influx of non-Muslim members from the Land Below the Wind, but then president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out that the party already had non-Muslim members such as some Kedah folk of Thai origin.

"Their presence will not be a problem because our Constitution allows Bumiputeras other than Malays to be members," he pointed out.

"They support all Umno policies, including Umno and Islam, even though they may not be Muslims."

Some of the Usno members, like Wong's grandfather Wong Yu Hian, were Chinese.

Umno's ranks swelled in 2001, when Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat also dissolved and thousands of its Chinese members joined Umno.

From 1991, Umno encouraged Orang Asli to set up branches, says Dr Juli Edo, a Semai

from Perak who is an associate professor with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Malaya.

Although Orang Asli branches had already been set up as early as the 1960s, he recalls, only Muslim Orang Asli could be full members, while the rest were associate members.

The academic with the Anthropology and Sociology Department estimates about 30 per cent of Orang Asli are Muslim, 15 per cent Christian and the rest followers of agama adat.

Rashid says his Kampung Permatang Siput branch members all follow agama adat and he estimates about 80 per cent of the Orang Asli in the other branches in Pahang do also.

By today, some Orang Asli, like Rashid, have become branch chairmen and they also boast a Senator in Dewan Negara.

Says Juli, "Orang Asli now have another channel for their problems and aspirations through Umno, in addition to the Aborigines Affairs Department.

"They can channel their problems through the division and it is up to the division to take it further," he explains.

"Some do; some don't."

Umno has helped the Orang Asli to get school buses, roads and other infrastructure and to tackle poverty, he notes.

But there are still outstanding issues relating to land and equitable development, he adds.

Orang Asli go through the proper Umno channels, agrees Rashid: "It works but not all the time."

Choo, a Buddhist like all the members of his Kampung Padang branch, has been branch chief since 1973.

Since then, he says Umno has helped its members of Thai origin in the Padang Terap division with basic development including the provision of electricity and water, roads to their smallholdings and a community hall. But they need more help with education, he adds.

Over in Sabah, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi appointed Wong's uncle, John Ambrose, as head of Umno's Penampang division, making him the only non-Muslim division head in the country.

Ambrose reckons Umno Sabah has between 20 to 25 per cent non-Muslim Bumiputera members including Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, Orang Sungai and Bisayah.

"And the number is growing. We are looking at Umno as a party which is very fair to us. In my division alone, I am running out of application forms," said Ambrose.

More than half of Penampang's delegates to the Umno General Assembly are non-Muslim Bumiputeras and the party also has one non-Muslim Bumiputera Member of Parliament and one non-Muslim Bumiputera state assemblyman.

"We hope for a Senator," adds Ambrose. (Umno's first Senator from Sabah, Datuk John

Ghani, is now an Independent.)

The division chief is optimistic, based on his own experience: "I'm given full responsibility.

"If I can run the division as a non-Muslim, that shows Umno doesn't care whether we are Muslim or non-Muslim Bumiputeras. If they think you can work, you will always have a place in Umno."

Back in 1949, Onn had proposed that non-Malays should be admitted as associate members.

"This met strong opposition from some but was accepted, although these associate members could not vote or hold office," says Zainah Anwar, who is completing a book on Datuk Jaafar Mohamed (Johor's first Menteri Besar), Datuk Onn and Tun Hussein Onn.

In November 1950, Onn said he would ask Umno's executive council to admit non-Malays as full ordinary members with equal status and to call the party the United Malaya National Organisation, says Zainah.

In January 1951, the executive council accepted in principle. But when he brought this to the Umno General Assembly later that year, it was rejected.

Onn then left to form the Independence of Malaya Party.

With its newer members of different ethnic groups and different faiths, is Umno now closer to what Onn envisaged?

Says Juli: "Umno is now opening a door, but it is limited to non-Muslim Bumiputeras. The rest can still be associate members."

Zainah says Umno's present form is not really what Onn had in mind. What he planned, she says, was "something more like what is now the Barisan Nasional (BN), with the major races working together in one non-communal party, negotiating for Independence."

In 2001, Dr Mahathir floated the idea of the BN one day merging into a single party instead of a coalition of race-based parties.

Component parties supported the proposal, but said the integration process should be carried out gradually.

For now, says Zainah, each ethnic group seems to be able to trust the party which represents their interests and work together with other ethnic-based parties in a multiracial government.