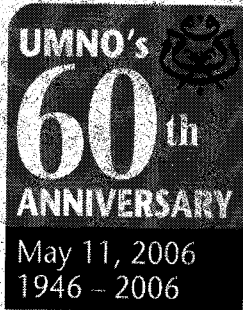


Umno's six decades of durability

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COMMENT

By Shamsul Amri Baharuddin



DESPITE deep internal divisions during the colonial period, the Malays, as an "imagined community" — to borrow Ben Anderson's famous words — held fast to the four main pillars of "Malayness": Malay kingship, Islam, *adat* (custom) and the Malay language, and maintained a form of "psychic unity".

The "psychic unity" of the "imagined community" was put to a severe test when the White Paper for the establishment of the Malayan Union was tabled in Britain's Parliament on Jan 22, 1946, and subsequently made public.

On April 1, 1946, the Malayan Union was installed to replace the British Military Administration.

The new form of governance removed one of the enduring traditional pillars of Malayness, that is, Malay kingship or *kesultanan Melayu*.

Indeed, even before the Malays were Muslims, their royalty had been the single most significant definer of Malay identity, captured and articulated in the all-encompassing and indigenous concept and word, *kerajaan*.

The Malays, a diverse and disunited community conducting a variety of anti-colonial struggles, found compelling reason and occasion, even if briefly, to create a com-

mon front, simultaneously rejecting the Malayan Union and seeking to restore *kerajaan* and its symbolic totem, the Malay sultans.

In that brief moment of unity, a coalition of Malay associations convened a series of meetings called the Malay Congress, from which Umno was born on May 11, 1946.

In short, Umno was born out of a "Malayness" crisis.

The Malays became united against a "common threat" over citizenship, their special privileges and the transformation of the title "sultan" to "president".

The Malay struggle against the formation of the Malayan Union ended when the latter

ceased to exist on Jan 31, 1948, to be replaced by the Federation of Malaya.

But with the common threat removed, Umno had to deal with the re-emergence of the pre-existing internal differences, or oppositionism; some based on old fault-lines and others emerging from new political interests.

The articulation of this oppositionism came to characterise Umno. The first instance was the resignation of Datuk Onn Jaafar when his idea of opening the party to other races in Malaya was rejected by the Malays.

Then came the formation of Pas in 1951 by the breakaway religious bureau of Umno. Since then, Pas has been Umno's main challenger within the Malay political constituency.

Umno successfully absorbed and neutralised Onn's political challenge when its new president, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, led Umno and its partners in the Alliance to a resounding victory in the first-ever general election in Malaya, on July 31, 1955.

The May 13, 1969 tragedy

was a severe test and a defining moment for Umno. It saw the departure of Tunku Abdul Rahman as party president and prime minister.

Tun Abdul Razak Hussein took the party's helm, becoming the new prime minister in September 1970.

During his brief but impactful tenure (he died on Jan 14, 1976), Razak saw the creation and implementation of the New Economic Policy, expanded the membership of the Alliance and gave it a new name, the Barisan Nasional (BN), in January 1973, and managed to woo even Pas into the coalition.

Under Razak, Umno established itself as *the* political party in Malaysia, providing nearly half of the Cabinet.

When Tun Hussein Onn succeeded Razak on Jan 15, 1976, he had to face a major crisis in the party when he brought to court Datuk Harun Idris, perceived as a "Malay hero" during the May 1969 incident, on corruption charges for which he was convicted and jailed.

In 1978, Pas left the BN after a leadership crisis in Kelantan, which led to an emergency being imposed in the State.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Hussein's deputy, both in Umno and the Government, and subsequently be-

came the fifth Umno president and the fourth prime minister on 16 July 1981.

He held those posts for 22 years and retired on Oct 31, 2003.

After hardly a year in office, Dr Mahathir's leadership was put to the test. A senior Umno politician, Taha Talib, was murdered a few months before the 1982 general election.

An Umno minister was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime.

Then came the Tengku Razaleigh-Musa Hitam battle for the party's deputy presidency in the early 1980s.

The 1987 "Team A vs Team B" contest split the party in two and led to it being de-registered in 1988 by a High Court decision.

Most spectacular of all was the sacking of Umno deputy president and deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, which contributed to Umno's worst-ever election results in 1999.

Under the stewardship of new Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, however, Umno bounced back to a resounding victory in the 2004 general election.

Riven by conflict for 60 years, Umno's ability to survive, thrive and prosper is remarkable. The key seems to be in the way the party is or-

ganised.

Umno created its own organisational structure, quite different from the federalist one giving each State a certain power and the central Government more power.

It was also different from the feudal structure that gave each Sultan control over matters of religion and *adat*.

Instead, Umno's strength lay with the grassroots at the *bahagian* or divisional level; a unit that became a check-and-balance against federalist dominance, state influence or royal control.

In any crisis, Umno returns to its divisions for its mandate. As a result, some argue, Umno's party election is the only fully democratic election in Malaysia.

Umno's division-dominated structure has given the party flexibility and durability. It is able to self-correct, absorb and contain oppositionism of all sorts.

As long as the power remains vested in the divisions, Umno should survive another 60 years.

■ The writer is professor of social anthropology and director of the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation and the Institute of Occidental Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.