

# Umno is still delivering the goods

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I JOINED Umno at the height of the political crisis in 1999. I didn't join as a university student during less turbulent times because I was still absorbing and learning what politics was about. Joining a political party is serious stuff. It is not something to be taken lightly or done because everyone is doing it.

It is a personal decision that speaks volumes about how you view the world. It should be a decision made after careful consideration about the party's history, its objectives, policy platform and current leadership.

I, therefore, took my time. As a student in the United Kingdom, I attended talks by leaders from both the ruling party and the Opposition. During dialogue sessions, I asked questions relating to positions the different parties took which troubled me.

Sometimes I got straight answers, other times I got a politician's side-step. I read and wrote about Malaysian politics, stress testing each party's policy stand on economic, religious and social issues.

And then 1998 happened. The world of Malaysian politics was turned on its head. Emotions ran high, loyalties were divided and people took to the streets. I presented a television talk show which discussed issues that were at the heart of the crisis. Again, I stood back and listened as leaders from across the spectrum articulated their views.

As the months passed and I digested the profundity of what was taking place, I thought the moment had come to pin my flag on a mast. There are crucial times in a nation's history where people are compelled to step off the sidelines and enter the fray. For me, that was it.

Others felt it, too. But many in my peer group threw their hats in the ring only to support a movement that wanted to get rid of the existing regime. I can see why, at the time, this cause attracted many young Malaysians. It spoke of post-modern



concerns which appealed to their political sensitivities — justice, liberty and democracy.

It coincided with a wave of political change that was taking place in other parts of the developing world, most significantly in nearby Indonesia. Even the rallying call for this movement in Malaysia was borrowed from our neighbour.

The ruling regime was depicted as being strong-armed, feudal and corrupt. Change was the political order of the day and many felt compelled to support this explosion of political expression.

While I understood and appreciated some of the concerns expressed by this movement, I saw things differently. I looked at each political party, including the one born during the crisis, and studied its *raison d'être*. I didn't merely look at their constitutional objectives but also the manner in which each party was formed to understand their objectives.

I saw that the two Malay-based parties of the "alternative" coalition were founded by politicians who failed to secure leadership positions in Umno. Both Pas and Keadilan were breakaway movements led by people who either lost or were expelled from the party. The only other Malay-based political party of note in Malaysian political history, Semangat 46, was also founded with similar separatist sentiments.

Parties with such turbulent births have great difficulty in shaking off the baggage of separation, especially without a complete change in ideology. Semangat 46 came back to the fold because it ultimately realised that its objectives were the same as



Party members at Umno's 60th anniversary celebration in Johor Baru. In 60 years, Umno has gone from strength to strength as it continues to bring about change for the nation.

Umno's and unity among the Malays was paramount to their shared objectives.

Pas has survived until today because it pursued a completely different ideology, catering for a segment of the Malay population that believes in its cause. Keadilan, on the other hand, is today a party the Malays say is *hidup segan, mati tak mahu*.

Although founded around the noble principles of justice and democracy, beyond the initial euphoria, many saw it as a single-issue party dedicated to the cause of a man who really didn't cover himself in virtue as he climbed the ranks in Umno.

The party that I felt was the real deal was one that may have looked a bit dated and was at the brunt of tremendous attacks and internal pressure. Yet, Umno has never wavered from its original objectives and still remains an inclusive political tent within its coalition framework.

Its mainstream political ethos may be conservative nationalism, but it is broad-based enough to accommodate views right across from the liberal fringes to the ultra-nationalist extreme. Different political strokes

among members have made Umno rich in its diversity and its leaders more sensitive towards the plurality that is Malaysia's political system.

Above all, the sanctity of the institution within the party cannot be breached. This is why although there have been numerous attempts to split Umno and even bring about its extinction, none have succeeded. The party has remained intact because of a cardinal principle that must be accepted by all members: that no individual member is more important than the party.

The moment an individual is celebrated at the expense of the party membership, the seeds of internal strife are planted. If personal agenda supercedes the collective will, Umno will cease to be relevant to the Malays and to all Malaysians. Leaders come and go, but the institutions of the party leadership and membership remain and it is these institutions that we must serve and to which we pledge our loyalty.

As we gathered on Thursday to mark Umno's 60th anniversary in the grounds of its birthplace, the Istana Besar Johor Baru, I was proud that

when all those around me in 1999 ran away from the big tent that is Umno — the same tent that has provided us with shelter from before Independence till today — I decided to come in and do my part.

After 60 years, you would think that it is set in its ways and impossible to change. After 60 years you would think that it is complacent or just tired. But after 60 years, it just goes from strength to strength, not because it bullies others or because it buys support. It gets better because it continues to bring about change for the nation.

From the anti-colonial struggle to Independence, from economic development to industrialisation, from Vision 2020 to the execution of the National Mission, Umno has given this nation the right solutions at the right time, and the right leaders at the right time. I am grateful for this and that's why I came off the sidelines. Happy birthday Umno, and may God bless this big tent of ours.

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