

# Poised for a role change

Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein is about to make the transition from the zealous politics of Umno Youth into the big boys club of the Umno vice-presidents. In the meantime, he has to win back public opinion that he is genuinely multi-racial at heart.

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**INSIGHT**  
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**T**HERE was a sense of accomplishment when the alumni of three of the country's earliest Malay secondary schools recently gathered in Putrajaya for a reunion dinner.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak was the guest of honour as his father Tun Razak Hussein had been the one to moot the idea of Malay secondary schools at a time when there were only Malay primary schools.

It was quite a glittering affair because many of the alumni have gone on to become top professionals.

In fact, among the alumni are Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Dr Awang Adek Hussin and Terengganu Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh.

Education has been the driving force behind the progress of the Malays in the last 30 years and, as Dr Awang Adek told some of those at the VIP table that evening, he would not have come this far had it not been for the educational push under the NEP.

His father was a fisherman in Bachok, then Kelantan's poorest district, and although no one could quite imagine the portly Awang Adek fishing for a living, the point is that this fisherman's son is now part of the Malay elite and all within a generation.

"Without these schools, many Malays would still be left behind in the kampung," said Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein who was also at the alumni gathering.

He has settled well into his ministry despite the myriad of issues, from school curriculum to spoilt milk.

The Education portfolio was once the stepping stone to any Prime Minister wannabe. It has since been eclipsed by the Finance Ministry but it remains a prime Cabinet post.

Hishammuddin is the second Umno Youth leader to have held the Education portfolio. When he was appointed, the Prime Minister told him to expect to stay on in the Ministry for some time to see the policies to fruition.

But he would know by now that one can only do well but never fantastically as Education Minister because there is no way anyone can completely satisfy the contrasting demands made on education by an equally contrasting mix of interest groups.

Hishammuddin was also in a pretty relaxed mood as he sat down for this interview.

He was impeccably attired as usual, and his laced-up leather shoes were polished to such a shine that if he looked down, he could probably see the reflection of his trademark grin. Apparently his wife handles his wardrobe, lending credence to the notion that behind every well-dressed man is a wife with good dress sense.

The last one-and-a-half months had been filled with Umno division meetings. They had been exhausting but satisfying.

He had found the Youth wing intact, united and quite ready for the general election. And although he did not say it, he also found that the Umno ground was ready to endorse him as a candidate for one of the vice-presidents post.

The home ground is in good shape but the same cannot be said of public opinion outside of Umno about him and his Youth wing.

Hishammuddin, who began full time politics in 1995, is about to reach an important crossroad in his political career.

Crossroads are never easy for anyone, let



**High-profile politician:** Hishammuddin (seen here with his wife Datin Seri Tengku Marsilla Tengku Abdullah meeting Chinese students from Beijing) has been criticised for what happened at last year's Umno Youth assembly and yet he has done more for Chinese education than any other Education Minister.

alone a high-profile politician. He is about to make the transition from the zealous politics of Umno Youth into the big boys club of the vice-presidents. The general election is looming and no one, not even him, is a 100% sure where they are going to end up after the polls.

## The keris issue

About a year ago, in an interview just days after the controversial Umno general assembly, Hishammuddin had been adamant that Umno Youth had done the right thing in the issue of the *keris*. He had confidently brushed off criticism about it, saying people would understand it was a symbol of Malay culture, not violence.

He still stands by the symbolic value of the *keris* but he knows now that many, especially the non-Malays, are still very upset about it.

The *keris* was already a symbolic item at the Umno Youth assembly in 2005 but it went by without much fuss.

However, the tone of last year's Umno general assembly had overflowed with such fiery Malay nationalist rhetoric that ordinary Malaysians were alarmed, even disgusted.

By the time the assembly ended, the *keris* had somehow come to epitomise all that display and expression of Malay supremacy.

The social landscape outside has changed so much in the last decade and it seemed to surprise many Umno leaders that many Malaysians are no longer prepared to take

such racial rhetoric sitting down.

The *keris* brought the full glare of public scrutiny on him as well as his deputy Khairy Jamaluddin, and Hishammuddin, being the Youth leader, had to bear the brunt of it.

Politicians with well-known family names have it easier in politics but the expectations are also higher and it was an unfortunate situation, especially given that his Prime Minister father is known as the Father of National Unity.

But when Hishammuddin visited China a few months ago, he called on his Communist political counterpart, Hu Chun Hua, First Secretary of the Chinese Youth League, and presented him with a *keris*.

"I explained to him the debate at home and, very spontaneously, I think it came from his heart, he said that it was not the *keris* but the person who holds the *keris*. I was stunned, for once I couldn't find anything to say. It endeared him to me immediately," he recalled.

But Hishammuddin said the *keris* would remain at the Umno Youth assembly in November.

His argument is that he wants to desensitise the *keris* just as he aims to desensitise Chinese schools, religious schools as well as language.

"I am not racist and I can say that with an all-clear conscience. People are trying to put a personality and judgement on my character based on a symbol, and that's not good. But I

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HISHAMMUDDIN TUN HUSSEIN

believe that how they see us will eventually depend on the end result."

Some Umno Youth figures have argued that even Tunku Abdul Rahman held the *keris* at a Merdeka ceremony in Malacca but that was then and, besides, Tunku is incomparable.

## New generation politician

But Umno politics aside, Hishammuddin is arguably the most progressive Education Minister that advocates of Chinese schools have ever had.

Only nine new Chinese schools have been built in the last 50 years and four of them were approved by Hishammuddin.

A long-time friend from their legal eagles days said Hishammuddin is very aware of China's ascent in the global economy and that he sees Chinese education as a major resource that has to be strengthened and opened up.

A few months ago, he made a number of important assurances on key areas of Chinese education, assuring the community that Chinese schools would not be closed and that new schools would be allowed. He also committed to resolving the shortage of Chinese teachers and improving the quality of Chinese primary schools.

Even the radical Chinese education movement or Dong Jiao Zong has said that he was a "new generation" type of Umno politician.

More recently he announced that the ministry had agreed that teacher-training institutes accept those from Chinese independent schools. It was something the MCA Youth had been pushing for and the unprecedented move was hailed by Chinese school advocates.

His current predicament begs the question of whether one can be a Malaysian leader and at the same time be a vanguard of Malay rights.

"In a way, he's been a victim of the near impossibility of combining the two roles. But you can't be all things to all people. If you want to be the vanguard of Malay rights, then you have to sacrifice some other part of your reputation. His popularity with the broader country has suffered as a result of that," said a well-connected media advisor.

Umno does not exist in a Malay bubble. Whatever Umno politicians say and do is closely watched. As the most powerful party in the ruling coalition, the statements and actions of its members carry clout.

When Hishammuddin moves on to vie for a place among the Umno vice-presidents next year, he will no longer represent young Malay men. His language will also change as his constituency changes. His journey as the leader of young Malay men will end and that of being a Malaysian leader will begin in earnest.

But some degree of scepticism is to be expected from the public. They want to trust him but they are also wary after what they have seen. The trust will have to be rebuilt.

And quite a bit of it will hinge on what happens at the annual Umno Youth assembly in November.