

The Umno voice of reason will prevail

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THE sabre-rattling at the last Umno general assembly unsettled even the Malays.

To say that the apprehension among the non-Malays who were watching and hearing some of the speakers was palpable is an understatement. Strong statements and worrying gestures were made, and frightening signals were sent.

Despite the noises and reactions, I believe one should not be unduly worried.

Political assemblies are made of these — stars are born, heroes discovered and future leaders identified.

And, of course, lots of hot air, rhetoric and protestation.

After all, it is a political gathering: a rally if you like, of chosen individuals representing various "interests" in Umno.

There were at least 2,500 of them as official *perwakilan* (delegates) to the assembly. They came from different backgrounds and with differing intentions and motives.

If you hear the troubling racial undertones in the speeches, then they were merely playing to the gallery.

If you hear anger, even despair, then they were merely pouring their hearts out.

Speaking up in a gathering such as this is an opportunity to be heard nationwide. Perhaps, to some listeners, with devastating effect.

Umno has gone through that 57 times in its 60-year history. The recent one is nothing new. If you have been following the assemblies over the years, then you will have heard a lot of those and worse things being said.

I always believe the ferocity of the attacks on other races by speakers at Umno assemblies is inversely proportional to its own strength.

If Umno is in a position of strength, as it is now, and least distracted by internal turmoil, party elections or outside threats, then the speakers are more inclined to be extremely critical of others.

You will have noticed that the bad guys this time around are not Pas, DAP or Keadilan but the Barisan Nasional component parties and the other races. Things, I assure you, will be different next year.

Of course, political assemblies are about letting off steam in various ways.

I would like to believe it is part of the process of "maturing" in Umno. It is an ongoing adjustment. Perhaps that is part of the dynamism that has sustained Umno.

It is even part of the survival mechanism in Umno, or else Umno would have long ceased to exist, like many other grand old political parties that have



By Johan Jaaffar

became footnotes in history.

One must remember there is an intense re-assessment going on among the Malays today. They are examining themselves as never before.

Partly, it has to do with the successes and failures of the New Economic Policy (NEP). They are actually reacting to their inability to achieve the desired target despite the fact that they have the numbers, political power and executive supremacy.

As values change, so too the Malay mind-set and psyche.

More importantly, we are dealing with the backlash of such failures and successes. Umno reflects the changes. You are now hearing new voices, different perspectives and fresh approaches.

I am arguing for the case that there is nothing inherently wrong with Umno to warrant a doomsday scenario.

Do not be distracted by the speeches you hear once a year. Umno can't stop its members from speaking up.

Umno is the epitome of democracy. If Umno fails to establish its democratic bearing, then that will be the end of it.

Those fiery speeches have to be understood in the context of the most dominant political party in the country. It is a Malay party and it has to behave like one. So, one can expect Malay issues to take centre stage.

Matters pertaining to the Malay Agenda, meritocracy, Islam, are part of the bigger narratives of the race it is representing. The entire question of the party's relevance hinges on such issues — rightly or wrongly.

I am happy to report that Umno still has leaders who understand what the party stands for.

Within the context of a country like Malaysia, Umno is also a crucial block in nation-building. Power-sharing among the various parties has been the success formula for a thriving, prosperous and peaceful Malaysia.

Sensible leaders have always been at the helm of Umno since its inception. Part of their staying power was the ability to make adjustments from what was initially perceived of them.

Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad started as firebrand nationalists but ended up as the leaders of all Malaysians.

Yes, I agree, some of the things said at the recent as-

sembly frightened even the moderate Malays. But these were echoes of unhappiness and resentment that Umno has to deal with.

There are people who have come to me and asked, "Are we to entrust the future of our nation and our children to the hands of these people?"

My answer has always been,

"Looking at the history of Umno, do not despair."

Fiery speakers in such assemblies are good messengers on a political platform. But they themselves largely become irrelevant when sensibility and decorum are needed to move Umno ahead.

There were many downright racists who became acci-

dental heroes, yet did not survive the test of time.

The political trajectory in Umno depends as much on personal charisma and ability as the art of adapting to changing dynamics.

Let people judge, not just Umno members. Let them play to the gallery. The people will know whom to trust.

More importantly, the voice of reason will prevail in Umno.

Remember that leaders of Umno eventually have to portray themselves as leaders of Malaysians, too. We are blessed to have many such people around.

Umno is in good hands.

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