

# Umno needs to get back to the people

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Umno, the backbone of the Barisan Nasional, also suffered at the hands of its electoral base as seen from losses of many Malay-majority constituencies, especially in the Klang Valley. Could the party have lost touch with the needs of its supporters?

**I**N the aftermath of last week's results, Umno and its leaders are in the midst of tearing themselves apart and in doing so, the party that brought us Merdeka is once again forgetting its true cause (representing the people).

At the same time, Umno is also revealing its arrogance - the same problems that led to its stunning reversal of fortune.

Umno must face up to the fact that it is no longer the sole party of the Malay community. Competition for votes is now a fact of life.

Its dominance of Malay and Malaysian politics has come to an end - PKR and PAS have now joined Umno on the centre-stage.

Nothing is more indicative of PAS' coming of age than Dr Lo'Lo' Mohd Ghazali's extraordinary victory in Titiwangsa.

Similarly, PKR has shown its national reach



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all non-Malays) feel the phrase has become a by-word for "my rights" - and/or "my contracts." In short, self-interest has overwhelmed the once respected party of Merdeka.

Indeed many outsiders see Umno leaders as little more than moving ATM machines shuttling from one lavish tented function to the next, hand outstretched, ready to be kissed. In essence, the party has lost touch with its original, *cikgu*, activist grassroots. They are ensconced in their big cars, hiding behind a protective and self-deluding wall of media bias, spin and elitism.

For all the talk about Chinese and Indian anger, seats like Titiwangsa, Shah Alam, Gombak and Bagan Serai could not have fallen without the determination of the Malay voters in those constituencies who made up more than 60% of registered voters there. This bald fact must force Umno's leaders into some form of introspection.

Why did the Malay vote desert Umno? Why are so many Umno leaders loathed by the very community they are supposed to represent and champion? What have they done or failed to do?

Honesty at this stage is vital: without it, all is lost and forever - and I for one do not want an Umno-led hegemony to be replaced by one of PKR and PAS.

Indeed, many generations-old supporters of Umno were repelled by the leadership's arrogance, disconnectedness from reality and self-importance. Moreover, the fixation with the Umno General Assembly later in the year meant that many Umno leaders were in fact more focused on the party apparatchiks (the infamous "G7") who vote in the internal party polls than the voting public.

For the Barisan and Umno, it is obvious that it no longer has the monopoly over core household issues. The hikes in fuel, cooking oil and other basic goods turned much Malay support away from the coalition where it should have held firm. Yes, perhaps the subsidies had to be cut, but their withdrawal was almost certainly to mean an electoral disaster for a coalition that had made them the bedrock of their socio-economic policy for decades.

So what next? Frankly, the party can never hope to win back non-Malay support if it can't address the erosion in its own core Malay base. Secondly, they will not start winning back these voters until they admit that the base is weakening. Self-denial will mean total annihilation in 2013.

Thirdly they must start listening to the people they're supposed to be representing - instead of lecturing them. Only then, having heard the peoples' concerns, hopes and fears, can Umno begin the process of renewal and reform.

Infighting meanwhile just confirms the rakyat's skepticism, contempt and anger.

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with wins in Pahang (Kuantan and Indera Mahkota), Kedah (Kulim-Bandar Baru, Merbok amongst others) and the Klang Valley.

Whether or not Umno will even continue to play a role into the future depends on how it copes with this setback and one of the most important things for the party to address - intelligently and humbly - is the Malay swing away from Umno.

This in turn has reminded me of two particularly strong memories from my travels across the country during the campaign period: the first was of an Umno convoy on the way to a campaign stop in Kelantan. It was made up primarily of black SUVs and MPVs roaring down a small country lane, brash and oblivious to their surroundings. Only a handful of the cars were from Kelantan.

The second was of another political convoy, this time from PAS. Their vehicles were much humbler - Kancils and Kelisas. As with the Umno cars, their licence plates indicated that they were from out-of-town as well. These were men and women who'd chosen to brave the long and exhausting drive home to campaign for their cause. This was a display of passion and commitment.

Minor as they are, these two incidents help explain the "Malay swing" that caused so much consternation in the last polls. They also indicate the two very different kinds of cultures that have taken root in the respective political parties which was to have a direct bearing on their vastly different fortunes on March 8 and more importantly the way forward towards renewal.

Umno leaders, by way of comparison, do not seem to have a clear sense of their mission and vision. Ask them what they stand for and they'll mumble a few words about "Malay rights." However, most Malays (and certainly