

UMNO hasn't changed in 71 years, says historian

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By Robin Augustin

Khoo Kay Kim sees the party prevailing as long as its leaders understand what the people want.

PETALING JAYA: Malaysia's largest political party turns 71 today.

Amid calls from the opposition for the ouster of the "UMNO dynasty", the Malay nationalist party is expected to present a picture of strength and unity at its celebration tonight at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium.

Critics have said the party and its leaders don't carry the values associated with the UMNO of old.

But has UMNO really changed? Veteran historian Khoo Kay Kim says he doesn't believe that it has or that its leaders are significantly different from their predecessors.

"UMNO leaders have not changed their perspectives," Khoo told FMT.

"Over the years, party members have been bonded by two primary factors, namely 'Malay' and 'Islam'. So long as a leader continues to emphasise both, he can survive.

"Onn Jaafar, the founder of UMNO, who tried to change UMNO into a Malayan party, was immediately rejected by the Malays.

"There is now, of course, the added need always to be concerned with the needs of the people."

The 80-year-old historian, an emeritus professor attached to Universiti Malaya, said the one major difference between the first two generations of UMNO leaders and the present generation was that the earlier leaders, especially at the national level, were more exposed to Western ideas.

He said earlier UMNO leaders could function better than present leaders because they understood the administrative and legal systems introduced by the British. The current leaders were more focused on local society, he added.

"The only flaw which can occur is they may sometimes place their own personal needs above that of the people. This can cause their downfall. But so long as they understand well what the people want, they will continue to prevail."

Khoo said UMNO leaders must remain aware of what the Malays had wanted since its inception, that is, to maintain the position of the Malays in the country.

UMNO was founded on May 11, 1946, in Johor Bahru and was strongly opposed to the idea of a Malayan Union, which was proposed by the British.

Subsequently, UMNO formed an alliance with MCA and later MIC. The Alliance Party led Malaya's charge for independence, which was achieved in 1957.

The Alliance eventually became Barisan Nasional, a coalition of 13 parties, with UMNO as the lynchpin.

All of Malaysia's six prime ministers have come from UMNO and the party currently occupies 86 of the 222 seats in parliament. It also leads the state governments of Perlis, Pahang, Melaka, Sabah, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, Terengganu, Perak and Kedah.

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