

Muda: The young guns need not go down in a blaze of glory

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SEPTEMBER 24 — The Sabah election unwittingly lends credibility to new party Muda — even Anwar Ibrahim's shenanigans yesterday do, but later on the man who won't accept his place in history.

The polls brought the past to the fore.

In the Land Below The Wind, dinosaurs were wheelchaired from intensive care units to nomination centres. Ex-federal and state ministers, former Dewan Rakyat speaker and former chief minister among others — even ex- CM Musa Aman's untimely ejection did not drop the age average.

Four-hundred-and-forty-seven candidates — or an average of 6.4 candidates per race — for 73 seats. For some, it means democracy is well and alive in Sabah. For others, it reminds how warlords leave the battlefield only in caskets.

To put things in perspective, while the choices are plenty, they are mostly old choices.

Muda asks new questions. And for that, this column applauds them regardless where the journey takes them, and Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman. I was critical of him before. But now, he's taking a stand, and he's not alone.

Fountain of youth

The acronym stands for Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (Muda) and there's no age limit.

But the broad understanding, tacitly approved by its team, is that it's a youth movement. Which cuts both ways.

The upside first.

Malaysia's political parties lack youth empowerment. They set up youth wings but their members usually do two things, bark at opponents and cheer on their senior leaders. That's not dissimilar to graduates of pet training schools.

The parties can brag about those they've promoted quicker. Khairy Jamaluddin in his late twenties had extraordinary reach inside the Abdullah Badawi administration, and DAP's ex-minister Yeo Bee Yin went from party volunteer to assemblyman inside of 15 months.

Those promotions, whether nepotistic or talent scouting, did not mean their party youths in general were encouraged to grow.

Look at the larger group.

Where was PKR's youth wing, Angkatan Muda Keadilan, yesterday when Anwar declared the PM position for himself without a party or coalition flag present? Is Anwar going to bring the 37 other PKR MPs to a new coalition as an individual or as party president? Was he going to ask anyone?

Where was the voice of those youths?

Or Umno's Zahid Hamidi saying with a straight face that his party MPs are free to support whoever they fancy. Pemuda Umno, won't they ask the president what sort of madness this is and order a re-examination of the pills he takes?

Where was the voice of the youth?

Youth brings idealism, but it's buried soon inside the walls of Malaysian parties. When two presidents of the two largest parties in Parliament collude without concern for party members it should be the young, with nothing to lose, who call them out. Kindly, quietly, call them out.

But that's not how the youth leadership in the country, and the next line of leadership are trained to react.

Oh, no! They learn to keep quiet, frame up their foreign diplomas and kowtow to their bosses till promotion day.

Which is why most of the country's talents stay out of the party system. And if Muda can draw them in by claiming they dare break from the past, literally, a new conveyor belt of leadership forms.

So yes, allowing Muda to be youth-focussed can draw in some amazing talents and with them, answers to the country's current paralysis.

The downside.

Appearing youth-led turns off other age groups.

Only 13 per cent of Sabah's 1.12 million eligible voters are below 30. If it's factored to below 40, then it's 40 per cent of the electorate. That's far from enough.

But Muda sensibly does not intend to alienate other segments, it just wants to milk all juice from its core group for the betterment of all Malaysians. Youth power does not mean the youths have no parents and grandparents, or interest in pension plans along with environmental plans.

However, few seats are won if overall voters misunderstand the raw energy of the new party.

Which is why, Muda must tune its messaging. The age emphasis is to break from the past and to underline the newness of the movement, as they seek inspiration from global movements, not the least, French President Emmanuel Macron's En Marche!

The lofty ambitions must capture all Malaysians through consistent ideas and not to recoil when attacked, especially for its youthful exuberance.

Pitfalls to avoid

If the past is what Muda runs from, then there's no excuse to accept leftovers from the old order on the basis of age.

The neatest way to erect a filter is to espouse a clear ideology which sets the tone. Those who join must pledge in, and if their past deserves it, they must apologise publicly to atone. A party founded on principles speaks of its own ideas more than it does about the weaknesses and errors of its opponents.

The ongoing Sabah election offers evidence galore on how leaders from parties with lengthy and certainly over-glorified names struggle to offer ideas. They tell you who to blame and who to fear.

For organisational integrity, no party is too new to abandon democracy within its structure. Down with appointed positions in the executive irrespective of how valuable the president is to himself. If the party wants Malaysians to have faith in them, then its leadership should have faith in its own members. Trust is a two-way street.

Deciding friends and foes, is next.

Syed Saddiq's seen with Pakatan folks campaigning in Sabah, but what's Muda's relationship with the coalition? This one is tricky, but pivotal. Is Syed Saddiq still Pakatan and just forms his own vehicle within the coalition to bolster his own negotiations for power?

Any permutation which leaves Muda subservient to Pakatan, Perikatan or the next coalition — as soon as Sunday — changes nothing and leads to mass disillusionment sooner or later.

Fortune favours the brave

Perhaps hardwired in Malaysian culture is to play it safe. This is that time to throw a grenade into that obsolete thinking.

Critics obsess over whether George Bernard Shaw or Oscar Wilde should be attributed with the saying youth is wasted on the young. I obsess about its meaning.

The seminal lesson in the advice is not to ridicule young people, but to suggest that the uncertainty early age forces on people makes them forget they have maximum strength to strike. They possess far more than they can imagine, and their age at times distracts them.

Well maybe not this time, because young Syed Saddiq has his segment's attention. Now he needs to brush aside his generation's and his own distractions and march forward together for Malaysia.

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