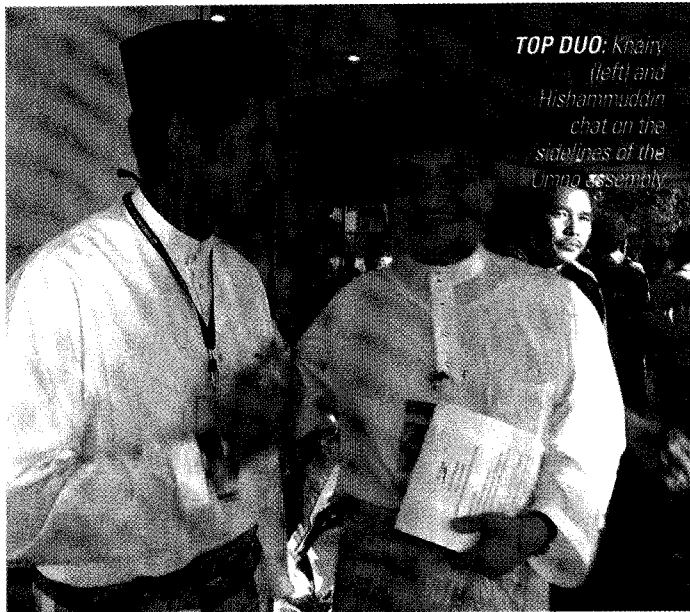


RECLAIMING THE FIRE OF YOUTH

Umno Youth suffered a confidence crisis after the Anwar sacking in 1998. Has the movement managed to regain its once-vociferous voice?

By *Habhajan Singh*



TOP DUO: Khairy (left) and Hishammuddin chat on the sidelines of the Umno assembly

In the last year or so, Umno Youth members have become a more confident lot. More and more have found the courage to don the short-sleeved white shirt bearing the label 'Pemuda Umno'.

Only a few years ago, members of the youth wing of the country's most powerful political party were not too comfortable to be seen in the official attire. They would rather have gone for something more neutral, something less 'Umno'.

Not anymore. If the recent Umno Youth annual general meeting was any indication, the wing has regained its confidence and footing. They walked with pride and a sense of purpose.

The Umno second echelon was almost paralysed following the sacking of former

Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. It had a crunching effect on the movement.

Soon, memories of the crisis may be history. 'You can see that Pemuda is now at its peak,' observed Umno Youth executive committee (exco) member Datuk Mohamad Norza Zakaria when met at the recent Umno general assembly.

Emerging leaders like Norza typify the recasting of Umno Youth. Young, intelligent and on the move, these leaders have managed to clear the doom and gloom that hovered over the youth wing after the crisis.

Norza was one of the 52 Umno Youth leaders given the ticket to contest in the last general election. Like most, he won. Today, he is the Political Secretary to the Finance Minister II, Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yacop. Equally important, Norza also sits on the powerful Umno Supreme Council.

Fellow Youth exco member Datuk Pirdaus Ismail agrees that the current Umno Youth team has regained its internal equilibrium. 'The waves of confusion of the past are no longer there,' he says.

The 1998 crisis had cut deep. The then

Umno Youth leader, Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, had sided with Anwar before the latter's fall as the Deputy Prime Minister. The youth wing was also packed with pro-Anwar leaders. Understandably, the sacking of Anwar was met with much emotion and confusion.

In the suspense-filled Umno Supreme Council meeting of Oct 6, 1998, the party accepted Zahid's resignation and appointed Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein as acting Youth head. In the same four-and-a-half hour meeting, the party expelled 10 members, including two State Umno Youth chiefs, Ruslan Kassim of Negri Sembilan and Abdul Rahim Ghause of Penang.

Also shown the door were Umno Youth assistant secretary Saifuddin Nasution Ismail and Anwar's former political secretary Mohamad Ezam Mohd Noor.

Hishammuddin had the unenviable task of beating the Umno Youth machinery back into shape. Once fiercely vocal and, some would say, loud, the movement had lost its voice. And with that, its appeal.

To make things worse, the younger generation's eye was riveted to the boisterous call for 'Reformasi'.

'It was a tough time. Those were the years when many members were shy to display their Umno colours,' says Sulaiman Samian, secretary of the Sepang Umno Youth. 'Now, the young ones are more daring.'

Rebuilding credibility

The resurrection of the Umno Youth spirit took a great deal of work. The new crop of leaders had to contend with all kinds of issues, ranging from the raging question of Anwar's sacking to the leadership style of the then prime minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Hishammuddin and company began engaging their target audience. Initially, the members were not convinced. At times, the leaders could almost feel the resentment even before they began to speak.

'We had to rebuild the credibility of Pemuda. It was not easy,' says Umno Youth deputy head Khairy Jamaluddin. 'After three years, well...'

Well, the wing has certainly managed to pull it off. The persistence has paid off,



Norza:
Pemuda is now at its peak



Pirdaus: *The confusion of the past is no longer there*

aided by the healing power of time. The *Pemuda Masuk Kampung* (Youth Visiting Villages) campaign has begun to bear fruit.

Still some way to go

But has Umno Youth regained its former glory? At the just concluded assembly, Hishammuddin wielded the kris, a symbolic gesture of power. Has the wing sufficiently regained its power to shape events, like it once did?

Some political observers reckon the wing still has some distance to cover. Anwar, for example, had quite a bit of sway during his days as Youth leader. But nothing beats the political base built by the former Selangor Menteri Besar and Youth head, the late Datuk Harun Idris.

On this score, the present team talks about getting things done without much ado. 'Pemuda today comes in a different mould. Today, we can urge the Government to get things done from within, in a cool and calm manner,' says Idris Haron, an Umno Youth exco member and Member of Parliament for Tangga Batu.

At the Umno assembly, the Youth members were visibly more vocal in their demand for a return of the New Economic Policy. Was it a gambit to regain past glory? The young leaders will be closely watched. **mb**