

Mahathir-style, at its best

AT the Umno Assembly yesterday, the Prime Minister lived up to his reputation of being hard-hitting, candid and firm, setting the tone for the style of leadership that Umno and the country will be in for in the next few years.

Not to be missed too was his sense of humour which has floored many an unsuspecting "victim" with its cutting edge, sometimes ameliorated by the PM's quiet smile, sometimes delivered with freezing frown.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir wielded a firm hand when he took on the gambling issue which has been the talk of the town not only at the Umno Assembly but also outside — among four-digit punters, lottery holders and Genting shareholders, just to name a few.

'Emotional issues'

Umno Youth had tabled a resolution urging the Government to ban all forms of gambling, including closing the casino at Genting Highlands and withholding support to government-sponsored projects like the Social Welfare Lottery and Sports Toto.

To all this, Dr Mahathir urged the Assembly to "leave it to the Government" to decide.

"These are emotional issues and the public could subject the Government to pressure that would prevent it from taking any rational move," he said.

"We are running a Government, not a reform movement," he quipped.

The resistance of the leadership to pressure was further seen in Dr Mahathir's winding-up speech when he

exhorted Umno members to place their trust in the elected leadership.

The PM and Umno chief submitted that while leaders are "temporary," they still needed members' backing to discharge the responsibilities entrusted to them.

"If there are signs that members are discontented with a leader, then the leader should step down," he said. "I promise if it happens to me, I will step down."

This candour and the ability to look at every question "in the eye" is a mark of the Mahathir-style.

But while he is capable of giving point-blank answers, (always pointed and seldom blank) he showed he was tuned in to criticism more implicit than explicit.

Delegates had asked, apparently, why the PM did not invite more people to his daughter's wedding last month.

The PM said at first he intended to invite only a few guests so the function could be held at his official residence.

But, being the Prime Minister, he was advised that he would have to ask more people whether he liked it or not.

"Finally," he said, "the list came up to about 2,000 guests, including mem-

bers of the diplomatic corps and as such, it was necessary to hold the function at Rumah Malaysia."

Dr Mahathir then touched on the question of holding a private function in government premises — a matter he felt should be clarified.

"His official residence (also government property) he said was simply not big enough and Rumah Malaysia was appointed the venue.

Common sense

He made it clear that the people involved in preparing for the function were given specific instructions to discuss and prepare for it "after office hours."

"I specifically told them that they should not talk of marriage during office hours," he said in a lighter vein, but added that the expenditure for the function was his own.

Delegates were reminded that common sense, such as the exigen-

cies of time and space, should be used in certain situations and followed up with an illustration that revealed his 'give as hard as he takes' stance.

When he announced the admission of former Abim leader Anwar Ibrahim to Umno, he was accused of misusing government property for party work.

"A journalist pointed out that my action was wrong because I was holding the Press conference in the PM's Department. I told him, in turn, that since his question was party-related and not government-related, then we should leave the place and talk in the Umno building. Then if he wants to ask questions about the Government, we can always come back and talk about that here."

"Isn't this crazy?" he asked, to which the delegates roared with approval and laughter.

The same surge of approval and support met the Prime Minister when he finished his winding-up speech.

All the way, one seasoned observer said, he held the audience and set the style that others will have to live up to — forthright, logical and firm, but not so serious as to be humourless.

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