

# Dr M's bid to curb rivalries



## IN THE NEWS

ALTHOUGH the in-  
day action-packed an-  
nual general assembly of  
Umno ended in Kuala  
Lumpur yesterday, a  
real test of the wisdom of  
party members has just  
started.

In the wake of Datuk  
Seri Dr Mahathir Moha-  
mad's unequivocal  
praise for his deputy, Da-  
tuk Musa Hitam, party  
members are now faced  
with a whole new scenar-  
io as they think ahead of  
the party election a year  
from now.

Although the Prime  
Minister said in his clos-  
ing address that he has a  
totally different reason  
for making the state-  
ment, i.e., to scotch ru-  
mours that there was a  
rift between him and Da-  
tuk Musa, delegates  
would not readily dis-  
miss other likely reasons  
prompting the Prime  
Minister to laud his depu-  
ty.

For three days, the  
talking point of the as-  
sembly was the lauda-  
tory statement he made  
when opening the assem-  
bly last Friday. That  
statement came as a  
bombshell to the 2,000-  
odd delegates and ob-  
servers attending the as-  
sembly.

The blast was heard  
loud and clear. It was  
deafening to some and

didate who had been nomi-  
nated by 50 per cent of the  
divisions to ignore such a  
demonstration of support.

Although the Finance Min-  
ister did not make a direct  
reference to himself, he was  
nevertheless hinting that  
should he receive that kind  
of support from the divi-  
sions, it would be impossible  
for him to stay out of the  
race.

What Dr Mahathir did was  
however not unprecedented  
in the history of Umno. The  
late Tun Abdul Razak did  
even more when he endorsed  
the late Tun Dr Ismail as his  
running mate.

The Prime Minister has  
every right to praise or even  
endorse his deputy, especial-  
ly after having worked close-  
ly and effectively with him  
for two years. This is surely  
not uncommon in a party or  
government.

But the question many del-  
egates and observers asked  
was why the Prime Minister  
made the statement now and  
at the general assembly. Be-  
cause of the timing, they saw  
the Prime Minister's move  
as more than just mere  
praise for an able colleague.

Quite apart from the need  
to dispel rumours that he  
and his deputy are drifting  
apart, there are many other  
reasons to justify Dr Ma-  
hathir making the state-  
ment. The most obvious of  
course is the fact that he and  
Datuk Musa have been able  
to work closely with each  
other, although not necessar-  
ily in total agreement on all  
issues. But the give-and-take  
relationship of the two men  
and their mutual respect for  
each other are well known.

After having worked with

sweet music to others. The spontaneous response of the majority was to give the party president a stupendous applause.

Although party members have by now accepted that their president is all too capable of springing surprises, they were not expecting him to make a statement which could be construed as taking sides.

His praise for Datuk Musa as a good team player was instantly interpreted by the majority of the delegates as reflecting the Prime Minister's preference should Datuk Musa be challenged in the 1984 party election.

Despite his comment to the Press immediately after delivering the address that he was merely stating facts (about Datuk Musa's performance as deputy party president and Deputy Prime Minister), many delegates held on to their initial interpretation.

In the true tradition of Umno where every member has equal right of expression, several delegates who spoke at the ensuing debate lashed out at the Prime Minister for his statement. One even held him responsible for flagging off the race so far in advance.

Understandably, the crux of the matter is the possibility of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah again taking on Datuk Musa for the party's number two spot. When asked for his comment, Tengku Razaleigh said it would be foolish for any can-

each other in the present capacities for two years. Dr Mahathir might have considered it timely and appropriate to tell the delegates of Datuk Musa's performance and to thank them for electing him.

The Prime Minister, who made the statement in the context of Umno solidarity, is known to be alarmed by what appears to be the growing division in Umno based on personal rivalries.

He had earlier made several references to this unhealthy trend and appealed to the so-called lieutenants of ambitious men not to aggravate the situation by continuously pitching one party leader against another.

Understandably, due to the intensity of the 1981 party election, the Prime Minister had expected the healing period to take some time. But after a full two-year period has elapsed, the party chief is certainly entitled to speak out his mind.

There is clear danger that unless the rivalries are kept in check, Umno may be turned into a party riven by factions, as is the case with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan.

The LDP is so badly divided into factions that the ability of a Prime Minister to manage the country is often undermined by the various factions. As a result, a Japanese government seldom lasts more than two years. As a developing country, Malaysia can hardly afford this.

There is also a danger that unless rivalries are softened, younger Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries might be drawn into the power strug-

gle.

Should this happen, the effectiveness of the government will certainly be impaired. This will hamper the implementation of the various new programmes initiated by the Prime Minister.

Umno, as the major component party of the Barisan Nasional, cannot afford to allow itself to fall into the same hole that has trapped so many other parties in the coalition. If this happens, it can no longer claim to be better than those other parties.

Rebutting critics, Dr Mahathir said that since he, like other members of the party's Supreme Council, was chosen to lead, he would not shy away from that responsibility.

"I believe in being frank. I don't speak about people behind their back. As I have said repeatedly, I am ready to be sacked if I deviate from the principles of my office," he said.

Dr Mahathir obviously enjoyed the heated debate although he came under strong criticisms for a number of issues, apart from his endorsement of Datuk Musa. His replies to his critics were equally sharp. He said it was only through a frank exchange of views that party leaders would be able to gauge the response and support of members. He received a standing ovation when he concluded his closing address.

Thanks to Dr Mahathir's provoking opening address, the routine general assembly turned out to be absorbing yet lively. "The man is getting to be wittier year by year," said one observer of Dr Mahathir. — By A. Kadir Jasin