

Coup of sorts for Dr

Mahathir

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By ZAINON AHMAD

EVERYTHING considered, the Umno general assembly a week ago was a coup of sorts for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Any assessment of the event could not but acknowledge, however reluctantly, the mileage gained by the Prime Minister in seeking to consolidate further his and his party's position.

After the hiatus following the February court decision, the holding of the assembly — and at its traditional venue — is in itself, given the media hype, significant.

To the members, it was a final reassurance that Umno exists and continues to function as the party of the Malays. The holding of the assembly also served to underscore the re-registered party's position as the leading member of the ruling Barisan Nasional.

To many Malays who had taken Umno for granted and who acknowledged they had benefited from the party's existence only after it was de-registered, the assembly and Dr Mahathir's opening address — telecast live — were comforting assurances that Umno is alive.

There was general euphoria all around at the assembly, buoyed to some extent by the victory of the Barisan Nasional in the Parit Raja by-election about a week earlier, as delegates and observers, relief and happiness written on their faces, shook hands and hugged each other.

Unspoken but understood was not just their happiness to be there but, after the uncertainty following the shocked decision that Umno was unlawful, to be able to gather at all. Thus, the handshakes were firmer and longer

and the hugs more genuine.

However, the atmosphere was a little tinged with sadness that "some are not with us." Indeed, some felt a little hollowness. But these feelings were quickly swept away as the delegates gave their full attention to the proceedings.

After last year's tense gathering and the election which saw the party split into two opposing factions and the unprecedented serious attempt to unseat an Umno president, Dr Mahathir and others must have certainly welcomed the "calm and peaceful" assembly.

It was a "gathering of friends," remarked others. At the same time they hoped it would be the happy ending to a nightmarish episode of court battles and verbal skirmishes marked by a whole slew of un-Malay-like open criticism, slandering and mud-slinging between the party and a "splinter group."

Disloyal few

They hoped it would be the beginning of a new era of togetherness and co-operation where every party member contributes in preparing the community to lead the nation into the next century.

It is certain that many of the delegates returned to their respective divisions and branches rejuvenated, filled with a new sense of vigour and determination to strive on to convince others of the cause of the party, and sufficiently fortified to weather the sarcastic and snide remarks thrown in their direction by those still opposed to the registered party.

As expected, the first caucus of

the party, formed in February, endorsed Dr Mahathir's leadership. The assembly also voted for a long period of adjustment before the holding of elections to elect new members of the supreme council.

Dr Mahathir's presidential address, which explained the court ruling as resulting from the action of a disloyal few, that Umno was essentially the same party as the one formed in 1946 except for a temporary break in its registration and which contained a vision of the new Malay received the standing ovation of all the delegates.

Also to receive the thumbs-up of the delegates was his announcement of places for Datuk Musa Hitam and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in his Cabinet at the end of his winding-up speech on the last day of the three-day assembly.

Coming at the close of the assembly, the offer was the master stroke of an astute politician. Endorsed by the thunderous applause, it became the offer of the assembly even though appointing Cabinet members is the prerogative of the Prime Minister.

It was a Catch-22 situation for Datuk Musa and Tengku Razaleigh. Outright rejection would be seen by the Malay community, already weary of the "civil war", as refusing to reconcile and make peace.

They would be seen as villains and traitors to the Malay cause, and would be made out to be as such, for disdaining the offer from a benevolent party after it did a *volte face* by suddenly opening its doors to all members of

the community without exception.

To accept now, after having gone the whole hog in opposing Dr Mahathir and Umno, would be losing too much face. Anyway, would the decision be theirs now to make considering that there are still in their camp some of those who had "burnt their bridges" completely?

Much would have to be considered. Acceptance and the agonisingly slow climb up the power ladder would have to be weighed against the prospect of immediate supreme power following the success in ultimately ousting Dr Mahathir before or during the next general election.

To reject would also mean a fight to the finish. They would have to count their men again in the light of a drop in morale after Parit Raja and the desertions after entry to Umno was opened to all.

Both Datuk Musa and Tengku Razaleigh, and especially the wealthy prince from Kelantan, are still power barons of consequence and it is because of that they are able to take to the field. But they are also not blind to the alignment against them.

Arrayed against them are other notables of the community who wield far greater power by virtue of their Government positions. And given the present situation, they exert even greater influence in the party than previously possible.

It is difficult for Datuk Musa and Tengku Razaleigh to entice them and their followers away following the general assembly.

But, they could align themselves completely with other

sources of support and create history, should they win, by forming a new alignment of parties to head the next Government.

At the same time, they must continue to preserve their image as credible Malay leaders who care for the community, for in the final analysis they must rely on the community as their power base.

It is a hard decision to make. In the light of this, Dr Mahathir is seen as generous for making the offer open-ended.

General mood

Some of the followers of Datuk Musa and Tengku Razaleigh responded, saying that Dr Mahathir missed the point completely when making the offer. They said it was not Cabinet posts that the two were after. After all, they said, Datuk Musa and Tengku Razaleigh were not sacked from the Cabinet but they resigned of their own volition.

They said what the two were after was the restoration to their original state all the structural changes made to the Government and the party.

Jelebu MP Datuk Rais Yatim said the changes in the Government were those relating to the judiciary, the party and the Constitution. Only after their positions were restored could there be talk between Umno and his group to resolve the problem of unity facing the Malays.

Their response is tantamount to a complete rejection of all that had been offered: peace talk, reconciliation, membership in the party, places on the supreme

council and membership in the Cabinet. The Government led by Dr Mahathir is most unlikely to annul all the changes it has made.

As for changes in the party, they have already been endorsed by the assembly.

However, Datuk Musa has still to make clear his stand after the initial vague response he made to the offer. Tengku Razaleigh is yet to respond.

While the general mood is now for reconciliation and unity, with many behind-the-scene moves being made to effect them, it does not take very much for the conflagration to flare up again.

Another by-election will do it. Hardliners in the "splinter group" may choose to disregard the moratorium called by their leaders on resigning their Parliament and State Assembly seats just to scuttle efforts towards reconciliation.

There are already indications that they are likely to do it should they see their leaders hesitating.

While Umno may declare its confidence, renewed after the assembly, of being capable of remaining on top of any situation, uncertainty will creep in again to rattle other members of the community.

Essentially, the "game" (it is that to the politicians) is still among members of Umno, even though a few have yet to sign up, but there are indications that others are losing patience and may decide to step in from the sidelines with the stated objective of restoring stability.

Maybe, even sanity.