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Umno-Assembly

MALAYSIA'S BIGGEST POLITICAL EVENT GETS UNDERWAY

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad this morning opened the Umno General Assembly, the biggest event in Malaysia's political calendar, that will see the party elect leaders for the remaining years of the 20th century.

Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, in another powerful speech, outlined the party and nation's agenda and outlook into the 21st century and once again left no doubt about his relentless political will to rid the country's largest political party of the scourge of money politics.

This year's four-day general assembly, which kicked off yesterday with the Youth and Wanita wings holding their elections, could not have been held at a more momentous time -- it coincides with the party's 50th anniversary and the return en masse into the Umno fold of members of the breakaway Parti Melayu Semangat 46 (S46) following the party's dissolution.

S46 president Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah handed over to Dr Mahathir the application forms of 200,000 party members to join Umno two days ago, thus further cementing the unity of the Malays, who make up just over 53 per cent of the country's 19 million population.

It also swells Umno's membership to 2.6 million, making it one of the world's biggest political parties.

But what takes centre-stage in this year's assembly is the party elections and if yesterday's polls at the Youth and Wanita wings are anything to go by, it is obvious Umno members are in the mood for change with the new millennium staring at them in the face.

The winds of change swept away party stalwart Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, who lost her 12-year Wanita leadership to Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman in stunning fashion.

Also toppled was Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik, who lost his Youth leadership to newcomer Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

While Rafidah's defeat was attributed by delegates and observers to her over-confidence and discontent with her performance as head of the women's wing, Rahim, who polled only the third largest vote in a five-cornered fight, is said to be still unable to shake off his tainted image caused by allegations of a sex scandal.

All this will make today's elections of the three vice presidents and 25 slots in the Supreme Council, the party's highest policy-making body, a cliff-hanger affair especially in the wake of Umno's crackdown against political corruption.

All forms of campaigning were banned in the run-up to the polls, making Umno the only party to have done so, and which will perhaps indicate the shape of things to come in the country's political party system.

Dr Mahathir has over the last few days reserved his harshest words against money politics that has been rearing its ugly head in Umno as well as other political parties in the country.

This phenomenon has been linked to Malaysia's economic prosperity which has been growing by quantum leap, transforming it into one of the most successful economies among Third World nations.

Umno is the dominant party in the 13-member Barisan Nasional coalition that has ruled the country since independence in 1957. The Umno president and deputy president, by tradition, become Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

Over the last few days, Dr Mahathir even went to the extent of branding

those using money to bribe their way into the party's front-line positions as criminals who, if left unchecked, will ultimately destroy not only Umno but also the country.

Dr Mahathir also said he would rather the 1,871 delegates to the assembly who will be voting today leave the ballot papers blank -- which effectively means spoilt votes -- instead of them being forced to pick corrupt leaders.

Voting in the triennial party polls, widely regarded as often being more important than the country's general elections, will begin soon as Dr Mahathir's much-awaited opening speech is over. The results are expected after 6pm.

The Umno polls are seen as crucial because the leaders chosen will also make up the who's who of Malaysia's political leadership, although this year both Dr Mahathir and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim have by consensus been returned unopposed as president and deputy president respectively.

The opening ceremony is attended by local and foreign guests, including Cambodia's co-Prime Ministers Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen, as well as representatives from 22 Umno Clubs overseas.

As the delegates cast their ballots, Dr Mahathir's constant reminders for them to reject corrupt candidates will no doubt reverberate in their minds, if not in the grand Dewan Merdeka of the Putra World Trade Centre, for in their hands lies the nation's future destiny. -- BERNAMA

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