

09/09/1997

A lack-lustre assembly despite all the right ingredients

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THE chorus of remarks from the sidelines were almost unanimous that this year's Umno general assembly which ended in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday would go down as perhaps the dullest in years.

Only the banter by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the end of the three-day assembly in response to a friendly jibe from his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim provided some relief.

And the Prime Minister brought the house down when, after taking a hilarious dig at Anwar, said: "One thing good about being (party) president is that you have the final say," referring to the conventional practice of having the party president as the last to take the rostrum.

The otherwise lack-lustre atmosphere, according to an observer, was a bit ironic because some events and circumstances leading to the annual gathering had all the right ingredients to light up the occasion.

Party vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib is facing charges in Australia, the value of the ringgit was at an all-time low last week, the stock market continued to be unstable, some mufti were allegedly branding others apostates and everyone was still interpreting how they see the position and probably future of Umno Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi as against his deputy Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

Party members' quibble over Zahid-Hishammuddin heightened recently when Hishammuddin was named Deputy Minister of Primary Industries, which some believed brought him one-up on his chief.

Then there were the allegations against Anwar about his private life leading to the Inspector-General of Police's official statement in Penang just two days before the assembly that the allegations were found to be baseless.

These are issues which come within the ambit of at least two of the main items in the agenda - debate on religion and the economy. But obviously the delegates who spoke were more comfortable with bread-and-butter issues like the role of State economic development corporations and Mara. Or on Umno's track record in promoting Islam.

An observer from Batu Berendam division remarked that the speakers were probably playing it safe, too safe to tread into deeper waters of mufti, aurat and religious symbols for fear that this could backfire. After all, next year is election year at divisional level.

The tone of the speeches, unlike in most assemblies previously, lacked the depth and substance to spice up the proceedings. And the sombre mood was noticed by Dr Mahathir himself.

In his adjournment speech on Sunday, the party president acknowledged that this year's assembly was not as lively as the last because the speakers touched mainly on academic issues. But this is Umno, he added tongue in cheek. "Kalau tak boleh hentam tak syok." (There's no fun if you can't criticise).

He said not many delegates discussed the role of culture and Islam in moulding character even though he had raised these matters in his policy speech.

An observer from Bukit Bendera division said the relatively dull atmosphere could be due to the fact that it came just after last year's party elections. So the element of anti-climax was there, he argued.

"And everyone is tired. Many members are businessmen bracing for what's next in the stock market. So their mind was elsewhere," he added.

Logical. Because many are elsewhere physically too. Unlike previously, this year's assembly did not seem attract the number of observers who would gather around the Putra World Trade Centre foyer and gossip over cigarettes and coffee. Missing too were many familiar faces who like to hold court in coffee houses with horror stories about this divisional leader or that supreme council member.

The Bukit Bendera observer said some speakers, out of respect for Dr Mahathir, were probably holding back what they had really wanted to say because the party president had, in his briefing to delegates on Wednesday, told them to maintain a high level of ethics and not to slander one another during the meeting.

In the end, Anwar himself chose to speak on the allegations against him. In his winding up speech, he called for a stop to such slander, saying "sudahlah" (that's enough) in a cool and composed tone.

He said there was no need to bring oneself to such a low esteem by throwing slanderous allegations against others.

"And at the same time, do not commit this sin and then pretend not to know anything about it," he added before proceeding with a pantun with a pinch of sarcasm:

Dari Bentan ke Tanjung Kandis,
Ramai pengembara bermain pakau,
Lagi berhadapan mulutnya manis,
Dalam sembunyi menanam ranjau.

It describes someone who appears friendly outwardly but stabs a friend in the back.

Most were quite surprised at Anwar's candour on the issue, especially the part when he mentioned the kind of support he received from his wife Datin Sri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. He said his wife had stood by him with the constant reminder that "this is politics".

He said Dr Mahathir had also repeatedly reminded him to have a lot of patience "but when the Prime Minister, out of anger, said rumour mongers should be shot, it was my turn to ask him to sabar (be patient)".

Muhammad's absence, though conspicuous, did not draw a single comment from the speakers.

Muhammad, into his second term as one of three vice-presidents, has been committed to stand trial in Brisbane on charges that he tried to take an equivalent of A\$1.2 million out of Australia without declaring it.

He resigned as Selangor Menteri Besar on April 14 but has remained as Umno vice-president.

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