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Umno-Rhetoric (News Analysis)

RHETORIC STILL DOMINATES UMNO DEBATE

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 5 (Bernama) -- Because of time constraints, delegates to the Umno general assembly which kicked off here today had only 15 minutes each for debate.

But if the shorter time allotted this time would prompt delegates to take the rostrum with more "meat" in their deliberations, this was not to be. At least not yet.

Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in opening the annual gathering of the country's largest political party, exhorted party members to create a new Malay culture to adjust to the current progress and developments of the modern world.

If the debating style of most delegates is anything to go by, this time around, as in the past, one hardly notices any change for the better.

Most spend a good few minutes heaping praises on top party leaders with superlatives that even border on idolising them.

Dr Mahathir himself has many times in the past told party members not to praise him sky-high, and according to the prime minister's aides, he personally dislikes being praised.

As a Muslim, praises are only for God Almighty, he has said.

Today, one delegate even called him the "Maharajah of Ideas".

Hardly any delegate on the opening day of the three-day assembly came prepared to debate on the harsh realities facing the nation today -- for instance, the decline in Malaysia's economic fortunes over the past few weeks following the plunge in the value of the ringgit and share prices.

"There's still too much rhetoric and singing praises of leaders, just as in the past years. They should move into more solid ground to debate on more substantive issues," said an Umno divisional leader.

"There's no harm in creating jokes to enliven the debate but sometimes there are too many and this takes precious time which could otherwise have been devoted to quality debate," he added.

"If you ask me to give a critical review, I should say that many delegates do not do their homework," said another observer.

Given the fact that it is their rare chance to take to the centre-stage at the party's general assembly -- and in the process perhaps to display their public-speaking flair and talents -- many seem not to take this "honour" seriously.

Dr Mahathir, in his opening speech today, as he did on other previous occasions, called on Umno members to be bold enough to show a good example, otherwise the Malays will remain backward, outdated and a subject of mockery and ridicule.

Umno leaders naturally need fresh suggestions and even constructive criticisms from delegates as representatives of the party's grassroots in efforts to tackle problems in the party and nation.

But general assembly veteran from Kedah, Datuk Badruddin Amiruldin is an exception to the rule.

As usual, speaking in "thick" Kedah tongue, he came up with fresh ideas year in and year out and had no qualms about criticising party and government policies if need be.

Today, he told the gathering that the Malaysian government is tackling its problems by means of too many ad-hoc measures.

Another "bad advertisement" for the country is that the prime minister even has to tackle petty matters like littering in public places, he said.

"What are the others doing?" asked Badruddin who related a story of an Arab, Chinese and a Malay in a sinking boat.

"The Arab said that it was better to save the women in the boat, while the Chinese said he would save the jewelleries. You know what the Malay said just three minutes before the boat sank...let's form a committee to deal with the crisis," said Badruddin, leaving some 1,900 delegates in stitches.

But some observers argued that the generally subdued atmosphere at this year's assembly could be due to the sharp declines in stock market prices since many of the delegates were corporate people, one way or another.

"The profile of Umno delegates over the years has changed. No longer are they teachers or junior civil servants. The mood of the stock market is being reflected at the general assembly," they said.

According to one of them, he was sitting at a lunch table today with seven other delegates who between them had lost RM30 million following the stock market plunge.

Whatever the reasons, Umno delegates would not be a let-down if they, like their party president, call a spade a spade. -- BERNAMA

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