

04/09/1997

Ringgit manipulation among topics to fire up Umno general assembly

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IT may not be an election year, but the Umno general assembly, which starts today with the Youth and Wanita assemblies, will be just as interesting for two reasons.

Firstly, the delegates to the Youth and Wanita assemblies will hear maiden speeches from their respective leaders Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman.

Secondly, the issues, which include the deliberate attacks on the currency to undermine the Malaysian economy, corruption and a review of the role of the mufti, are expected to be debated extensively.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Zahid and Siti Zaharah are also expected to touch on these issues which have been plaguing the country.

The delegates who are assigned by their respective movements and State liaison committees to debate the motion on the economy, are expected to speak strongly on the deliberate attack on the Malaysian currency.

They are also expected to call for greater patriotism among Malaysian market players to help prop up the money and share markets.

Last week, Dr Mahathir said the Government was aware that local banks and securities houses were also involved through lending shares in their custody for a fee to the manipulators.

He said the shares did not change hands but manipulators could trade the stocks down by repeatedly selling them short.

He warned that action would be taken against those who sabotaged the economy, which included the revocation of licences.

"We know who's doing what. People who sabotage the economy must be made to pay the price, especially those in the country," Dr Mahathir had said.

Although, Dr Mahathir did not mention names, it appears that some delegates know exactly which institutions are involved.

"This is far from what is expected from Malaysians. In the long-term, when the economy is down and out, will these people gain anything?" asked another observer.

Siti Zaharah and Zahid, a banker, are expected to speak strongly on this issue in their first speeches as leaders of their respective wings.

Issues pertaining to mufti and fatwa are also among hot topics expected to be debated.

Dr Mahathir, upon his return from his two-month holiday in July, reacted strongly against the manner in which the Selangor Islamic Affairs Department detained three beauty contestants for going against a fatwa.

These actions led to various measures and it was decided on Tuesday, at a meeting between Dr Mahathir and State mufti, that matters pertaining to fatwa should be referred to the National Fatwa Council to ensure uniformity.

Dr Mahathir had repeatedly stressed that it was not the Government's intention to curb the activities of mufti, but certain procedures had to be observed when issuing a fatwa.

Siti Zaharah and delegates to the Wanita assembly are expected to touch on these issues, especially on the possibility of women being represented in the council.

Certain quarters had talked about the need to include women in the council to ensure that decisions, especially on issues pertaining to women, were made after listening to their views.

The issue of corruption, although appearing to have subsided, is again expected to be brought up by delegates.

This is especially so as the Barisan Nasional had given a thumping endorsement to the Government's war against corruption and declared that the scourge should be fought without fear or favour.

The 14-party ruling coalition unanimously agreed that those who accepted gratuities in return for favours should be prosecuted, irrespective of their status and political affiliation.

In announcing the BN's decision on Aug 9, Dr Mahathir said gifts and souvenirs received by BN politicians and government servants should be sent to the Finance Ministry to be valued.

"Action against corruption should not be confined to Umno alone. It should involve all BN parties," said an observer.

He said the decision that gifts and souvenirs received by BN politicians on official duty should be sent to the Finance Ministry to be valued, was a step towards eradicating the disease.

The youth movement is also expected to make a commitment on corruption with the belief that once the scourge is arrested at its level, the problem will be minimised when they take over as leaders of the nation.

Some party observers say that delegates may even raise the issue of poison pen letters containing various allegations against certain leaders.

The youth movement will debate three motions - a motion of thanks on the leader's address, economy and entrepreneur development as well as one on religion, society and education.

The movement is expected to place greater emphasis on education, calling for a Malay Agenda in private institutions of higher learning. It may even suggest a special fund to help finance Malay students who are unable to enter these institutions due to financial difficulties.

The women's wing will debate the motion of thanks on the leader's address, as well as a motion on the economy and one on religion.

It is expected to call for the greater participation of women in nation-building.

The general assembly will debate the motion of thanks on the presidential address, a motion on religion as well as one on the economy.

In contrast to previous years, there is no motion on education this year.

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