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Course in politics and economics for party leaders, delegates

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IF Umno watchers had expected a lot of fireworks during the recently-concluded Umno general assembly, they must have been sorely disappointed. But they should not have been.

Many had expected sparks to fly during the three-day assembly because of the momentum that seemed to have built up in the weeks before the assembly.

Two words - "cronyism" and "nepotism" made a political comeback in a big way during the weeks before the assembly. They became so fashionable.

"They were catchwords. Everyone was uttering them," said a Johor delegate.

If the reminder by Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to delegates on the eve of the Umno Youth and Wanita Umno assemblies was any indication, then the stage was set for a cautious deliberation of these issues, if they were ever raised at all.

Dr Mahathir at the customary pre-assembly briefing to delegates reminded them that they should be responsible for what they say at the assembly.

Anyone, he said, who raised issues that could destabilise the party, should be accountable for the consequences of his or her action.

All attention naturally then was on Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi who seemed to have set the tone for a debate on allegations of "cronyism" and nepotism".

Dr Mahathir said he should have used the party Supreme Council as the channel to voice his grouses on the issue.

Was it, then, much ado about nothing? Yes and no, said some Umno delegates and political observers. Not many sparks flew but there was much to think about.

Dr Mahathir, in fact, spoke on the subject in his explanation of the country's current state of the economy in his presidential address as well as in his winding-up speech at the close of the assembly.

Accusations of crony-capitalism, nepotism and non-transparency, he said were first used by currency traders to attack the economy and currencies of Asian countries.

And to show that there was nothing to hide, he released on Saturday two lists - one containing names of companies and individuals awarded privatised projects, shares and permits.

The names included those of his "cronies" as well as those of his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and hundreds of others who are not known to either of them.

Four other lists were subsequently released the following day. And Dr Mahathir has promised to release more, if the need arises.

There were of course, mixed reactions to this development. Some said the lists confirmed the practice of cronyism and nepotism. There were, more who said that if cronyism and nepotism were practised, then they cannot be that bad.

"They should be based on merits, qualifications and trust, perhaps in a way subjective. But, there is always in any organisation, a nucleus of people whom you trust and you know are capable and qualified. The fact that a person is your friend, is incidental.

"Of course sometimes, one's judgment is defective, but that is a risk one has to take. It happens in the West," said an analyst.

What has emerged from this year's assembly, the last before next year's

party elections?

Certainly everyone hopes that unity will prevail in facing the challenges ahead.

But more than that, many see Dr Mahathir to have emerged the undisputed leader in Umno.

Indeed he has issued a strong unmistakable signal to everyone, including his critics that there are far more important issues facing the party and the nation than accusations of bad government.

Never mind the fact that Ahmad Zahid had defended his own criticisms of crony-capitalism and nepotism, saying that these were not "wild criticisms" nor were they echoes of foreign views.

Dr Mahathir said that accusations of crony-capitalism and nepotism against the government were indirect attacks against the New Economic Policy.

He spoke of Malaysia's success in social engineering that led to an equitable distribution of wealth that brought about Malay prosperity and then of course, political stability.

Said an analyst: "The NEP was key to political stability in the country. It was a conscious and deliberate policy of economic discrimination to bring about economic prosperity and political stability."

Delegates were reminded that the Umno-led Government had helped create a successful Malay middle-class and some Malay millionaires who have in turn fulfilled their social responsibility. And not to forget the millions who benefited from such schemes as Amanah Saham Nasional, Amanah Saham Bumiputera and Amanah Saham Wawasan.

"Dr Mahathir was literally giving a course in politics and economics to the delegates, including party leaders," said a veteran politician. Perhaps, he alluded, the political consciousness of most Umno delegates is not that sophisticated that they are unable to see the bigger picture.

"Dr Mahathir sees that bigger picture. The forces that have brought down the economies of our country as well as those in the region.

"The issues are not cronyism and nepotism. He was explaining economics that is not in the textbooks. He is giving a course on the struggle of the party and on neo-colonialism.

"How many Umno delegates really understand the economic problem we are facing? We hope they do now," he said.

It was significant that Dr Mahathir spoke on his personal experience under colonial rule and warned of economic colonialism now.

An Umno delegate agreed that there is no crisis in the country unlike in Indonesia where the country is beset with both political and economic problems.

"Government repression worsened the situation there. And Dr Mahathir explained to delegates that we are very different here."

And what of Ahmad Zahid whom some delegates said went through a meat-grinder?

Did he commit a serious political error?

If indeed, the complaints were from the grassroots, then Ahmad Zahid should have explained to them or gone back to the supreme council to discuss the matter.

A veteran observer said Umno Youth cannot operate as a separate entity, independently of Umno. Doing so, he reflected, smacked of the 1970s when Umno Youth attempted to do so.

"There were times the supreme council then did not even get the annual financial report of the movement. An Umno Youth chief cannot try to build his empire."

"Indeed, the only thing he should do now to is to go back to the grassroots and explain."

Perhaps, the veteran said, young and not-so-young Umno leaders and members should realise that Umno is a political organisation not a club in which electing board members is the most important thing.

"Umno is a political organisation. Don't turn it into a club. There is a struggle. It will have to continue its struggle because its enemies change."

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