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Evident that froth of possible leadership contest has fizzled out

Rashid Yusof

AS THEY journeyed home last night, Umno delegates were not the only ones consumed with the manner the general assembly - the last before supreme council elections next year - had concluded.

Non-card carrying party members, like schoolmates Nasir, 36, and Syawal, 35, who practically had Umno politics for lunch yesterday after listening to the last speaker, Datuk Badrudin Amiruldin, must be among scores of Malaysians who had much to talk about.

The cause of the exhilaration was partly because the high points of the annual gathering were not quite expected in its run-up.

Example - the assembly which seemed to be moving towards embracing "nepotism and cronyism" as one of the main menu in the days leading to the annual meet, actually debunked them.

"The slogans of nepotism and cronyism are dead," said assembly observer Abdul Aziz Din, 41.

Another major surprise was the flurry of disclosures as the assembly drew to a close.

With delegates and watchers inundated with loads of fresh information on matters like companies which were awarded privatisation contracts and special share allocation, an emerging feeling has been that the distribution of wealth had been wider than expected.

"One can see that there were many recipients. There were familiar names, while others were not," said supreme council member Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, a sentiment articulated by the party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as he pulled off another virtuoso performance during the winding-up.

Party vice-president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told reporters, people would now understand the implication of bringing up such issues following the president's winding-up speech.

The contents of the disclosure would continue to be discussed, though.

The bigger blocks of shares should have been broken up to benefit more people, said a Johor delegate, who admitted that he went bankrupt twice in his business career spanning 32 years.

"After all, these to me, are practically hand-outs. Still, I believe the transparency should be lauded."

Said a supreme council member: "The impression had been that only businesses seen to be aligned with a particular group had benefited. We know now that is not so."

In another turn of events, Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the Umno Youth leader who has been associated with articulating "nepotism and cronyism" found himself a focal point.

This came after Dr Mahathir related how he had brought up the issue after reading about it in newspaper reports at a supreme council meeting, only for Ahmad Zahid to keep mum when it was the forum for such matters.

Still, Ahmad Zahid who was besieged by reporters afterwards, said "I can still afford to smile."

Should Ahmad Zahid now apologise to the Prime Minister, reporters asked Abdullah? His reply was: "What for? Even the Prime Minister did not ask him to."

The need for calm and reasoned manner of discussing issues through the proper channel, was also taken up.

Said another vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, himself a former

Umno Youth leader: "For the Umno Youth, there is a need to balance between their responsibilities to their members and party leadership."

As for now, observers also believed froth in the undercurrents which seemed to be pointing towards a possible leadership contest next year, had fizzled out.

This was evident when deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim reiterated his loyalty to the party president and told the assembly how they were working together.

Dr Mahathir responded: "I am relieved." He said likewise when Abdullah said he supported Anwar in his winding-up speech, the latter had whispered to him that he (Anwar) was relieved. Which Dr Mahathir said (as he told Anwar) there was no such thing as permanent friends or foes in politics.

To Ghani, already being mentioned as a possible candidate for the vice-presidency, the assembly had come out strongly in the support of the leadership.

Observers said looking back, the role of key speakers like Badrudin and supreme council member Tan Sri Sanusi Junid - making an appearance as a speaker after six years - in driving home the unity message, was interesting.

While the normally witty Badrudin, delivered an emphatic oratory towards the end of his speech on such themes, Sanusi was candid, though in a light-hearted manner said: "If Anwar wants to challenge Dr Mahathir, he will have to deal with me first."

And, how do observers reconcile the twists that the general assembly took after the rather "fiery" build-up?

Explained a supreme council member: "Ahead of every assembly, there will be parties building up momentum for a particular issue to be raised. And this gives the leadership an opportunity to clarify them."

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