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Except for some minor sparks, a perceived calm prevailed

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AHEAD of Siam's invasion of Kedah - an Umno figure with a historical slant recounted yesterday - the "whispering brigade" (musuh berbisik) descended on the old Malay State, feverishly talking up the invincibility of the marauding Siamese army.

"The strategy brought forth so much fear and disintegration in the Kedah ranks."

This was Umno supreme council member Datuk Dr Affifuddin Omar providing his analysis, as observers attempt to fathom the nature of undercurrents in this mass, modern party now.

Expanding on his theory, Affifuddin claimed that in the run-up to the general assembly, this modern musuh berbisik spread the word on things allegedly not going quite right. Further damages were prevented when the leadership clarified the issues raised.

Umno concludes another of its annual meeting today. And the hair-splitting among some observers on the goings-on is rooted on the perceived twists that both murmurs and open speeches had taken since the start of the annual meeting with the Youth and Wanita gatherings on Thursday.

For instance, some observers were trying to understand and pinpoint how the "slight temperature" afflicting the party in the build-up to the annual meeting has been swiftly doused. Because, after Umno Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi had set the tone with a rather "strong" speech, subsequently taken up by Youth delegates, the tone had markedly changed. Except for some sparks provided yesterday such as by Ruslan Kassim, a delegate from Negri Sembilan, who attacked a recently published book.

Are the speakers holding back?

"I don't think so," said Tan Sri Redzuan Salim, Parit Sulong division chief. "Some of the speakers spoke their minds. It all depends on the style of individual speakers." A delegate who was with Redzuan chipped in: "This kind of temperature shifts is vintage Umno."

This other delegate said the truth was nobody would know the thinking of Umno members and even that of the delegates as the party prepares for a general assembly.

"If you go to the villages in Tan Sri Redzuan's division, they cannot understand what the fuss about nepotism and cronyism is all about."

Knowing by now that unlike Redzuan, he would not be named in this article, the delegate became more forthcoming, saying: "The heat in the run-up to the assembly was stirred by renewed speculation on whether there would be a leadership contest."

To Abdul Latiff Endut, 38, head of Johor Baru Youth division, such speculations and the tone of the speeches were intertwined with the speech of party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the pre-council meeting ahead of the general assembly.

This was when Dr Mahathir said those who raised issues which might create adverse reactions or split in the party had to be responsible.

"The president's speech brought back some sense to the delegates," Latiff said, as he put together a picture which looks something like this: In the run-up to the general assembly, the foreign media played up the recurring issue of succession, spiced up with slogans of nepotism and cronyism.

Although the articulate Latiff would not say it, many thought this was fuelled by, among others, several of Zahid's remarks on "nepotism and

cronyism".

In conversations yesterday, Zahid's supporters backed the stand of their boss. Will he be lying low now after the intensity created and the criticisms they stirred?

"That is simply not Zahid," said Umno Youth assistant secretary Saifudin Nasution.

Amid all these, some observers alluded to a new phenomenon in this year's general assembly - speakers are not getting the usual dose of applause.

"You see," said an observer, "some 43.8 per cent of the 1,907 delegates are businessmen and professionals. They are the single largest group at the assembly."

While it remains uncertain whether the silence was due to the nature of the speech or the personal problems afflicting some delegates, observers said the perceived calm would take another twist today. Some analysts believe the general assembly will end in a manner which will be quite unprecedented.

Divisional heads had by now received a host of fresh disclosures, including a 20-page list naming 171 companies and principal shareholders under the title Maklumat Asas Projek Pengswastaan (Information on Privatisation). These are companies already awarded privatisation contracts.

"More disclosures including those given special share allocations, can be expected," said a source.

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