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Umno (News Analysis)

MAHATHIR, FIRMLY IN CONTROL, FIGHTS BACK

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, June 21 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's opening speech at the annual Umno general assembly has always been regarded as his "Speech of the Year" and this year was no different.

It's like the U.S. President's State of the Union address that spells out the nation's agenda for the year.

This year it was all the more a speech Malaysians and Malaysian watchers alike were looking forward to because unlike in previous years when Malaysia was enjoying economic boom, the country is facing its worst ever economic downturn caused by the regional currency turmoil.

But the three-day general assembly of the biggest party in the ruling coalition that ended this evening saw more than its usual share of controversial issues on the agenda, coming as it did amid accusations by the party's Youth wing leader about nepotism and cronyism in the award of some privatisation projects and a series of articles in international magazines and newspapers calling on Dr Mahathir to step down and hand over power to his Deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Fighting back, Dr Mahathir pulled a surprise when yesterday he made public a list containing names of a few hundred people awarded privatisation contracts. He followed it up today with another list containing names of hundreds of others who benefited from hundreds of millions of ringgit worth of special shares offered to Bumiputeras by companies listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.

These unprecedented disclosures heated up debate in the otherwise chilly condition inside Putra World Trade Centre's Dewan Merdeka, for many years now the venue of the nation's biggest political show of the year.

In his opening speech on Friday, Dr Mahathir, in his usual combative style, turned the table on his foreign critics, saying the regional economic crisis was an attempt by the West to recolonise Malaysia.

Malaysia, he said, like its other Southeast Asian neighbours, had fallen victim to the colonialists who have virtually destroyed the once Tiger economies of the region through globalisation, liberalisation and deregulation.

The influential Asian Wall Street Journal, for instance, in a report last week, called on the prime minister to announce during this general assembly itself, his retirement plans to make way for Anwar.

Indications that Dr Mahathir would pull a rabbit up his sleeve at the assembly gained momentum when the Umno president sounded out a warning in a closed-door meeting with party leaders at the national, state and divisional levels on Wednesday.

"Dr Mahathir told this meeting that if India and Pakistan could make nuclear bombs, he too has a bomb which he could explode if necessary," said a party insider who attended the meeting.

Dr Mahathir, who has on a few occasions told his interviewers that he regards his position as Umno president as more important than that of the prime minister, today took more than 90 minutes to hit back at his critics.

Speaking in a measured tone to drive home his counter-attack to the 1,900-strong delegates, the prime minister appeared particularly stung by the criticism of nepotism and cronyism which came not from his Western critics but from Umno's own Youth wing chief, Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

Zahid at the Youth wing's annual assembly on Thursday, spoke strongly

in calling for an end to the "unfair distribution" of the country's wealth through the privatisation projects.

Dr Mahathir took Zahid's criticism head-on, saying it was unfortunate that it had come from a senior party member, who had chosen to discuss the matter publicly, and in the process undermining the party's unity and country's stability, instead of raising it during meetings of the Supreme Council.

He reminded party members about what happened to Indonesia where the issue of nepotism and cronyism caused social unrest that led to the downfall of President Suharto last month.

But he said there was nothing to compare the circumstances prevailing in Malaysia and Indonesia. He said in Indonesia, which Dr Mahathir did not however identify by name, virtually all privatisation projects were given to children of the former president and their cronies.

" The lists which we made public showed that hundreds of people benefited from the privatisation and the special issue of special shares in Malaysia.

" So many of them are not even known to me or to the ministers. I admit that my children were also given shares but they did not get more than others. When we talk of nepotism and cronyism, it means the benefits go only to a few people close to the leader of the country but here thousands of others also benefit," he said.

" When the Umno Youth leader himself makes this kind of accusation, it's like hurling faeces at all of us, including at me," he said.

Recipients of the special shares, ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions of units, include Dr Mahathir's three sons, the father-in-law of Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime ministers Tun Ghafar Baba and Tan Sri Musa Hitam and a daughter of Government Economic Adviser Tun Daim Zainuddin.

Once again, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, had to come out with an assurance that it did not cross his mind to challenge Dr Mahathir for the Umno presidency at the party polls scheduled next year.

He had to do this because Dr Mahathir in his winding-up speech said that while he did not doubt Anwar's loyalty and support to him as party president and prime minister, there were times he was not too sure of this when statements attributed to Anwar and articles of this effect were written in the foreign media.

Anwar admitted today that he had been repeatedly asked by foreign journalists why he did not dare to go for the party presidency, which brings with it the post of prime minister.

" One of them even told me that the undercurrents were very strong, and that I would win the president's post because he said I had 65 per cent of the support of Umno members. Why should I...to me the party and national interests are paramount and not my own personal agenda," said Anwar.

An Australian journalist asked Dr Mahathir at a press conference later if the show of support for both him and Anwar meant that he would be president and prime minister for another four years.

He said that this would appear to be so but things could also change. "Four year maybe, but at the same time I can withdraw at any time within the period. This is a personal decision I haven't yet made," he said.

Dr Mahathir has emerged from another party general assembly firmly in the driver's seat, but it was also obvious that he was thinking more about the nation's No.1 agenda, that of putting the battered economy back on tracks.

" I am working all the time, including on Saturdays and Sundays, to try to overcome our problems. Sometimes I can't sleep well looking at the economic indicators, our falling ringgit and other problems," he said.

In a way, the just-ended general assembly was a baptism of fire for Zahid.

He did show his mettle by being outspoken in a party not very tolerant of open criticism, but in some ways, it has backfired on him.

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