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Mixed reaction to a speech that attempted to drive home a message

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FOR a while yesterday, World Cup fever took a back seat. Hours after football fans, some in a state of semi-trance, saw Cameroon trounced 3-0 by Italy, attention shifted to the eagerly-awaited speech by Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the Umno Youth chief.

In an environment where reading between the lines is an art form, the heightened anticipation and buzz at the Putra World Trade Centre were caused by the impression that Zahid would fire a few salvos when delivering his keynote address.

Like revealing the names of so-called cronies at the normally sedate annual gathering of the Youth movement, the precursor to the General Assembly which kicks off today.

The excitement generated by what Zahid was going to say was evident from the queries newsmen had for his Press aide when he handed out the text of his boss's speech.

"Did he (Zahid) sleep last night?" "How many times did he change the wording?" "Did he watch the World Cup?" "Can you tell us whether he had a few alternative speeches, just in case?"

The Press was duly told that the speech, which had gained celebrity-status because of some of Zahid's earlier remarks, was ready "two days ago" without any ensuing changes.

Some 43 minutes later - that was how long the speech took - a big crowd of delegates, observers, reporters, "watchers, analysts and lobbyists" mingled at the PWTC lobby to voice and solicit immediate reactions. Opinion was varied as to how Zahid had performed.

"After all the build-up," said an Umno member from Ipoh, "I thought that it was an anti-climax."

There were praises too, from those who saw it as a well-argued speech.

Then there were those who attacked it. "At times, he played to the gallery like when he was telling the delegates that some of the businesses should have gone to them," said someone.

Some observers believe Zahid achieved what he had set out to do - to drive home the message to Umno members that some measure of criticisms (tegur-menegur) was acceptable.

This was echoed during the debate by the delegates who, among others, wanted an end to budaya mengampu (a culture of pandering or currying favour).

Giving a calm assessment, a Minister's political secretary described Zahid's speech as "different".

"For instance, he retained references to slogans like nepotism and cronyism."

Some claimed that this was a hint of subtle defiance.

There were dissenting views within the ranks. Said Umno Youth Jeli division head Zahari Kecik: "We have to admit that favouritism exists in Umno Youth too."

From Pahang came this view from Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim, 39, who is head of the Malaysian Youth Council, Benta State Assemblyman and vice-head of the Raub Umno Division. (He was not a delegate.):

"We should give priority to attaining economic recovery ... what was said had to be sincere. It should serve as a reminder."

Suhaimi's then went on to say that Zahid should declare his assets to prove that he was himself clean.

A recurring theme during the debate was nepotism and cronyism, and much effort went into interpreting what these words really meant.

To the Arau Umno Youth division chief Ismail Kassim, cronyism and nepotism existed everywhere, including in the (US President) Clinton administration and even in Lim Kit Siang's DAP.

As reporters crowded round the delegates seeking their interpretations to proceedings yesterday, a delegate reasoned: "We are young" in a manner that was even apologetic, as if hoping to explain away and neutralise the tone of some speakers.

All these incidents had seemingly eclipsed the Wanita Umno general assembly held at another hall but observers said the tone set by its leader, Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman which preceded the debate, was equally important.

Speaking at her usual furious pace, Siti Zaharah gave the assurance that the Wanita wing would remain united to defend the stability of the party, Government and country and would fully support the leadership of Prime Minister and Umno chief Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

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