

20/06/1998

Proceedings seem to indicate unity theme will prevail at meeting

Rashid Yusof

PERHAPS anticipating fireworks, Tan Sri Sulaiman Ninam Shah, the stoic and witty permanent chairman of Umno, began proceedings at the general assembly yesterday by firing a routine light-hearted reminder to delegates: "Don't bring in firearms."

Not that anybody had harboured such thoughts, of course.

With fireworks in local political terms normally arriving in ripples of intrigue, observers scrambled yesterday to put together the big picture generated by the proceedings.

Some spotted an element of the traditional Malay martial art of silat pulut where exponents gracefully pre-empt and neutralise moves without actually striking, thus averting confrontation.

Unmistakably, unity emerged as the rallying cry as delegates leapt to the defence of the Government and the leadership.

They expressly articulated the priorities - the task now is to deal effectively and firmly with the economic heartache.

Echoing this, delegates assailed the slogans of "nepotism and cronyism" which floated to the fore during the last few weeks.

Delegates said if these two words demonstrated the abuse of power, then it would negate all the good works done by the Government since the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1970.

Said the first speaker, Terengganu's Datuk Abdul Rashid Ngah who is also a writer: "Cronyism when translated into Bahasa Melayu is konco-konco, which sounds so awful."

A few figures like vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (the son of former Prime Minister the late Tun Abdul Razak) and deputy Umno Youth leader Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein (the son of another late Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn) were mentioned by a few speakers.

"They are where they are as they are good," said a speaker.

Essentially, the speakers wanted the top two leaders to stay. "Don't give up yet (jangan lepas lagi)," said a speaker, referring to party president, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Ahmad Mazlan, representing Johor Umno, said: "We have full confidence in the leadership."

With Dr Mahathir and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim reaffirming their support for one another at a Press conference at the end of yesterday's proceedings, delegates expect the unity theme to prevail throughout the assembly.

There were loads of evidence of this. Mat Isa Sabu, the Kangar MP, who is fond of telling his audience that he should not be mistaken with his namesake in Pas, posed a series of questions.

One was: "Is it the fault of the Prime Minister that he has raised the dignity of the community?"

Referring to alleged differences of the leadership, one speaker reasoned: "How could this be true when they spend hours talking to each other daily?"

Setting the tone yesterday was the most important speaker - Dr Mahathir, who in all his finesse, could have disappointed those watchers hoping to hear a fiery speech.

"Because, the president kept above the fray, opting to focus instead on his thoughts on the economy, he has further refined his same arguments in the past," said a delegate.

"It is such an important speech," said a Minister, "that it should be read over and over again."

The first day of the assembly this time did not spark any rumbustious scenes like thunderous applauses, except perhaps during the potent display of prose and wit by Ismail Yaakob from Kedah.

Delegates said this was partly because the speeches were laced with subtlety, and at times, sarcasm.

A speaker alluded to those people being quoted by the foreign media - which again came under fire. "But why do we not accept the local magazines and newspapers?" asked Rashid Ngah.

Conspicuously not making comments to the Press yesterday was Umno Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi who, many thought, made a "different" keynote address at the Umno Youth assembly on Thursday.

But, he was not neglected by the speakers.

Said Mat Isa Sabu: "Datuk Seri Najib is the son of a former Prime Minister. So is Datuk Hishammuddin, while Datuk Syed Hamid is the son of former Umno Youth leader Tan Sri Syed Jaafar Albar and Datuk Zahid Hamidi is the chairman of the BSN ...

"Should we blame the leadership (for practising nepotism and cronynism by appointing these people)?"

(END)