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Umno meeting still leaves open question of who will be deputy

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HAVING amended the party constitution, this thing lurking at the back of the minds of Umno delegates at Sunday's extraordinary general meeting would not budge: curiosity over the vacant Number Two post has not been deflated. In fact, it could have been heightened.

With the business of the day being relatively low-key (such meeting is not expected to provide fireworks, said a Wanita delegate) the "Number Two poser" was wafting about at PWTC's Dewan Merdeka, the venue of the EGM.

In the absence of any announcement, and speakers largely did not discuss the subject, the speech by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was dissected for clues: thus setting off another reading-between-the-line frenzy.

Active political minds went into action when Dr Mahathir said: "Remember, in politics, there are no permanent friends, there are no permanent foes."

Many were swiftly asking whether that was a veiled reference to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah who with vice presidents Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, are being touted as the frontrunners for the post.

However, there is evidently no benchmark for accuracy in the art of seeing things with a third eye, especially when many had faltered in the past when reading the likely moves of the Prime Minister.

On this particular remark by Dr Mahathir, an aide to a supreme council member, for instance, was of the opinion that anybody could interpret things to weigh in their favour.

Others seem to think that if clues are being sought, then statements by the Prime Minister over the past few months on the subject must be seen in totality.

However, the head of a Kedah division saw the "no permanent friend and foes" reference as an advice in general terms.

"It is not just about enemies becoming friends. Friendship too can take a different twist," he said. He alluded to the relationship between Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to emphasise his argument.

Alternatively, the "friends, foes" remark could also be seen the way Dr Noridah Ibrahim, head of the Wangsa Maju Wanita Division, views it - which was simply "the president was obviously stating a fact."

That is why, said Datuk Junus Wahid, head of Tanjung Malim division, the underlying tone in the speech of the party president was vintage Dr Mahathir.

"He likes the people to think ... it is subject to interpretations," said Junus.

Beyond the question of who will be Deputy Prime Minister, party elections and even the actual constitutional amendments, the speech is being seen as the party president putting forth a substantive argument on unity, a credible party and how the party is more important than individuals.

The unity theme might have been omnipresent in past major party speeches of the Prime Minister, but some observers believed it had again risen to the top of the agenda following Anwar's expulsion from the party.

To some, like head of Seremban division Datuk Ishak Ismail, the unity question was linked to the factor of Anwar's influence. "But it is true that the question of unity is important," said Ishak.

Dr Mahathir made repeated references in his speech to the importance of Umno being united and credible, saying: "What I want to stress here is the fact that it is important to have a united and credible Umno. If Umno is weak, it will certainly be weak when there is disunity, and the political stability and a Government which is credible and with power will not exist in the country."

A journalist who has been covering Umno general assemblies since Dr Mahathir became party president, said in the past few assemblies the Prime Minister while not neglecting unity, had been emphasising other issues like money politics.

"Unity may not be exciting, but he articulated it well," she said.

To acting Umno Youth head Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, beyond the talk concerning the Number Two post, the well-being of the party and the issue of unity were paramount.

Still, as delegates journeyed home on Sunday, the speculation over the Number Two post remains alive.

Some observers see the impending Sabah State elections which must be held by March as a key to the question. As Anwar did in the 1994 Sabah elections, they felt that a party figure has to lead the hustings in Sabah, and that task is not for Dr Mahathir who has other pressing things to attend to.

"If both vice-presidents are assigned to the task, there is this question of having a single, cohesive approach," said an observer.

In this light, a Kedah delegate - probably keeping alive the possibility of the Number Two post being filled before the June party elections - said Dr Mahathir could not have been expected in the first place to name his deputy at PWTC on Sunday.

"That is not his style when it comes to major announcements. What he normally does is to issue a brief statement," said the delegate.

Dr Mahathir, nonetheless, almost caused a stir on Sunday when after concluding the winding-up speech, he said that he still had something else to say.

But suspense was shortlived when he wished everyone a safe journey home.

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