

Three key issues to take centrestage

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Important day for Malays and the country

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For the Malays, indeed for the country, today is a very important day. It is the start of the Umno general assembly.

Being the backbone of the country's political power base, the mood and issues discussed have always proven to be the correct barometer to gauge the country's current political situation.

Three main issues are expected to dominate this year's general assembly, with the preparations for the general election topping the list.

Another equally pertinent issue that needs to be addressed is Umno's failure to win the trust and faith of the young Malays, especially the educated ones.

The third issue, which is indirectly related to the general election

and Umno's preparedness in facing the opposition parties, is expected to revolve around neutralising sacked deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's influence among members.

As the last general assembly before the general election, this will be the unofficial launch of Umno's preparation and campaign. That being the case, points raised by leaders and delegates during debates are expected to be very political in nature.

As part of the pre-general election campaign programme, delegates can expect to get an earful of replies from Umno leaders on allegations levelled against them by the opposition.

As party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob aptly puts it when briefing the media about the assembly preparation on Tuesday: "We must prove to the opposition that we are not short of answers."

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However, on the second issue, things are not that clearcut. This very tricky issue begs a very diplomatic approach from party leaders. A wrong step will alienate these young potential supporters from Umno.

The biggest problem facing party leaders is how to make the students and twenty-something Malay professionals realise that Umno and its struggle are still relevant to them and their future.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has admitted that Umno has committed a "mistake" by leaving students alone for so

long so that they can concentrate on their studies.

The immediate task facing Umno now is to work on how best to bridge the gap which has been exploited by the opposition parties so that the students can be more receptive to the party.

Despite vehement denials from party leaders that Anwar and his influence on party members will not be a major concern at this assembly, it is expected to take up more than a bit of floor time.

What form this will take is still unclear. The approach may be indirect, but the intention is to "clear the air" once and for all. This is seen by many as very important if Umno is to be able to mount an effective campaign against the opposition.

Even Khalil admitted that there is a possibility that there are still some Umno members who are sitting "on the fence" when it comes to the Anwar issue. These are those who are still keeping their options open, attending Keadilan meetings without signing up as its members or leaving Umno.