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Atmosphere at assembly pregnant with anticipation of `surprise`

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SURPRISE! Pending Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's presidential address at the Umno general assembly this morning, the air had been pregnant with anticipation.

Not in the last few years, at least, that a speech by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had stirred such incessant speculation and boundless enthusiasm long before it actually took place.

"What is the surprise? How will it figure on the Richter Scale in terms of the intensity of the shock?"

These questions leapt above the din, any which way one turned at the Putra World Trade Centre.

An official said he could hardly walk a few paces at the PWTC without being stopped by those anxious to find out what it was all about.

Well, in the first place, will there be a surprise at all? Dr Mahathir was asked at a Press conference on Wednesday.

Or has there been some misunderstanding in the way the Prime Minister was reported as saying last week that he would have a surprise in his speech at the Assembly?

The reply by Dr Mahathir neither doused the excitement, nor shed any light.

Typically, the Prime Minister said: "Just wait ... if I tell you it won't be a surprise ... a no-announcement would also be a surprise."

At the same time, reasons are unknown why some observers feel the surprise (if at all there will be one, or two, or more), will come in the speech which normally goes beyond the one-hour-mark.

And, why not during the course of the Assembly? And based on past experiences, the Prime Minister rarely veers from the prepared texts.

Just what is in store then? "The president must have something in his bag," said party secretary-general Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob, who did not attempt to unravel the mystery, beyond saying it was good to have such a hype.

Tan Sri Sulaiman Ninam Shah, the permanent chairman, on his part was a believer that there would be a surprise. But what is it? "I would not know," he said.

Let's look at the possibilities. To begin with, many have agreed on something which Dr Mahathir is not going to do - announce the general election dates at the Assembly. "It is just not the proper platform and occasion," said a delegate.

To get to the bottom of this, many were yesterday studying the recent speeches and remarks made by the Prime Minister.

They found this - before the selective exchange rate controls were announced on Sept 2, Dr Mahathir actually said he would announce some shocking measures.

Therefore, the surprise factor has to be there, many were telling each other yesterday. As the exchange rates were unthinkable, then will this surprise be similarly radical and unprecedented?

Also, will the Prime Minister again be articulating on reasons behind the unfavourable number of new membership from among the professionals, as the case when he briefed delegates on Wednesday?

Some suggested that given such a backdrop, the Umno president might well speak of the need to effect some "structural adjustments" within the party, like introducing new faces among professionals as candidates in the

coming general election.

After all, the issue of getting the right candidates is said to be key this time.

Or will he be discussing an entirely different subject this time?

Like the rumoured appointment of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah as Kelantan Umno chief? Quite a number of delegates were convinced there would be an announcement to this effect. Yet, does it constitute a surprise after all, some were asking in the corridors.

Will the further release of names of those who had benefited from privatised contracts come as a surprise then?

To better understand what is in store, observers were dissecting the contents of Dr Mahathir's briefing at Wednesday's presidential briefing.

Many could not figure out a particular reference on the Malays' inclination to get bored (bosan) over something which is old to the extent that past deeds would be obscured.

Was the Prime Minister referring to the party, which is a recurring theme?

In any case, observers said it would be unlikely that the Prime Minister was actually referring to himself. It was also unlikely his speech would contain references as to when he would step down as observers said this would affect party morale at a time everybody was focussing on the general election.

Is this going to be a speech full of surprises or a speech which is essentially "different" from previous ones, which would make the journey home for delegates replete with questions?

The poser will soon be answered. The best bet is to put aside attempts at punditry, and take the safest option - just wait for Dr Mahathir's speech today.

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