

23/06/1999

## Capturing the Umno spirit

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IT was ironic that the first Umno General Assembly without Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 17 years, focused quite considerably on the man and his political machinations.

Ironic, but deliberate, of course.

To clear the nagging doubts, to remove the spectre of Anwar still lingering in the dark recesses of Umno's psyche, it was crucial for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to explain once and for all how he came to the conclusion that Anwar was not the right person to lead the party and country.

And this the Umno president did, in both his opening address and closing remarks.

To support him, both Supreme Council member Tan Sri Sanusi Junid and Umno treasurer, Tun Daim Zainuddin also told the 2,045 delegates of the chicanery connected with Anwar.

All this, said an observer, will help Umno delegates prepare for the general election. When they get down to the ground, they will know what to say.

"It was a fighting speech, a call-to-arms," said former Deputy Prime Minister and Umno Deputy President Tan Sri Musa Hitam. "Quite obviously, elections are around the corner."

Seen in this context, he said, the speeches were necessary. The first target were the doubters, the second was the electorate in general.

If there had been any reservations before this, they would have been cleared by the end of the assembly, another observer said.

"Of course, there are people who have made up their minds, no matter what. But in Umno, the case is closed," said veteran Umno member and special envoy to the United Nations, Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad.

"Yes, enough has been said. Anyway, we can see what is happening around us," said a Wanita exco member. "Six months ago, there were people willing to die for Anwar. Today, these same people won't even fall ill for him."

"From now on," another delegate said, "Umno should just ignore the statements being issued by Anwar. We are doing the right things. We should just move on." Intriguingly, this was the view of many - though none wanted to be quoted. "Dr Mahathir need not fear that people won't understand. We do and we will do our best in the general election," said the Wanita member.

Apart from Anwar, the second most important deliberation focused on Pas.

To be sure, the issue of Pas was handled deftly by Dr Mahathir and Supreme Council member and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Paduka Abdul Hamid Othman. The latter, in a heartening manner, gave delegates the confidence they would need to counter Pas.

Don't get intimidated, he said. The party merely camouflages its political designs in religious garb.

Beyond that, some delegates and observers felt insufficient attention was given to other substantive issues.

Although Dr Mahathir spoke about Umno's links with the young and some discussion on this took place during the debate, it is not known if Pemuda is aware of the extent to which the party is detached from Malay youth.

"Is Pemuda in denial? Why is the acting head still going to the UK to talk to Umno clubs overseas when the problem is far more serious here?" asked a Wanita member.

Another major disappointment, not as noticeable because of the enormous attention given to Anwar and Pas, was the performance of Wanita at the assembly.

The speech by the Wanita head lacked focus, the statements by delegates were lethargic and the few who spoke in the Umno debate were hardly memorable in the points they made.

A reporter who covered the Pas muktamar several weeks back said, compared to the Wanita crowd, the Pas women seemed far more assertive and dynamic in their comments and proposals.

Indeed, there were no pragmatic suggestions. Instead, one observer says, the achievements of Wanita, heard in earlier assemblies, were repeated.

Although there was some discussion on Islamic family law, it was far too superficial to be of any significance.

Wanita did say, however, that they would reach the grassroots with the Internet. How practical is this proposal? Would they not have to equip people with computers before they can influence them through the Net?

The concern shown by Wanita over Petronas' new logo (which is said to resemble the Pas logo) seemed far more important than, say, the humiliation faced by Muslim women in syariah courts.

Overall, the quality of debate could have been better. Delegates spoke about boosting Malay entrepreneurship, protecting Malay dominance, putting together a school syllabus to instil patriotism and getting the Attorney-General to head the bar council.

The one proposal which seemed progressive was the call for women judges to be appointed in syariah courts by Terengganu Wanita delegate Rohani Abdullah.

This was responded to quickly by Hamid Othman who said having women judges in such positions is consistent with the principles of Islam.

Beyond that, "it was boring," complained a veteran Umno member.

"We should get out of this 'puji-memuji' way of doing things."

The party needs ideas, said Rosnah Majid, Merbuk Wanita head. "We want to know if Government policy is being implemented properly. What is happening on the ground? Instead, what we get is rhetoric. When there is nothing substantial to say, delegates tend to meander and waste time," she added.

"Perhaps," said the Wanita exco member, "this isn't a time for substance. What is needed now is the spirit to fight because we are preparing for battle.

"We shouldn't complain about what was said or wasn't said at this assembly. I came looking for Umno's spirit and I found it."

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