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Election issues to dominate assembly

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Umno goes into its assembly from Friday with the impending general election emerging as a rallying point given its overriding importance amid the current political backdrop.

Its secretary-general, Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob, said today the 53rd general assembly would, in a way, mark the launch of the "final stages" of preparations for the general election which must be held by next June.

For this, Khalil said, Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to set the tone in his keynote address by rallying the party together and motivating members in preparing for the polls.

An indication of the central themes of the assembly will come tomorrow when Dr Mahathir addresses the customary pre-council or presidential briefing.

It will be attended by many of the 2,034 delegates, including supreme council members, Umno and Wanita Exco members, and eight office bearers from the 165 divisions.

Observers said Dr Mahathir's remarks that there would be a surprise in his speech at the assembly and speculation that Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah would be made Kelantan Umno chief had heightened anticipation ahead of the assembly.

Expanding on the significance of this last Umno assembly before the general election at a Press conference, Khalil said the singlemost important aspect for the party now was for the Barisan Nasional to retain the two-thirds majority.

"So, this time, we hope our speakers will be more political in their speeches," said Khalil, the newly-appointed party secretary-general and Information Minister.

The economic progress will also be emphasised.

This was because it was seen as important, particularly for the young, who Khalil said, "came (were born) in the middle of all the struggles".

Thus, the young were not completely aware of the hardships involved, he added.

At the Press conference, Khalil, among others, was asked whether the issue involving former Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim would crop up since this was the first general assembly since his sacking last September.

In essence, he added, the party would stay focused on winning the general election. "All delegates will have to think election," Khalil said when asked to comment on the scope of the debate.

In the meantime, the mood at the Putra World Trade Centre, the venue, has picked up ahead of Umno's most important gathering this year.

Thursday will see the simultaneous opening of the Youth and Wanita meetings by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

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