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Mahathir-Window (A news analysis)

MAHATHIR'S LATEST VISIT TO KEDAH, AN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

ALOR SETAR, July 21 (Bernama) -- A brief working visit it was. But two days on his trail were enough testimony of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's inherent leadership.

Despite the brevity of the premier's itinerary the visit opened a window to understanding the Prime Minister and the journey of blood, sweat and tears that moulded him into what he is.

No matter how many speeches the prime minister delivered at the various programmes drawn up during the 48 hours, he stuck to his cause -- for race, religion and country.

Detractors may dismiss the run-of-the-mill message in his speeches as nothing more than a politician's attempt to endear himself and his party to the electorate as a general election draws near.

But his message goes beyond mere party politics. It is about preserving unity, about serving sincerely, about man being grateful to God and fellow man, about control of the economy and mastery of knowledge, Information Technology in particular.

Dr Mahathir's function at Sekolah Sultanah Asma here to open its Smartlab turned out to be an emotional one not because of past ties with the school.

But because scholastic backwardness of Bumiputera students is a traditionally emotional issue for Dr Mahathir.

Past and present realities moved him to tears and forced him to cut short his speech there but not before leaving an emotional message to the 1,000 teachers and parents present.

His wish was for teachers and parents to lead Bumiputera students to emulate the single-mindedness of their Malaysian Chinese peers in acquiring knowledge by simply ignoring other non-knowledge-related distractions.

For someone who was Education Minister in the 1970s obviously Dr Mahathir speaks with conviction that Bumiputera students are generally inclined to indulge in various undertakings except for achieving academic excellence.

"Tell me how many of those students who rioted, kicked cars and set fire to rubbish dumps in Kuala Lumpur recently obtain good results," he asked during a press conference in Gurun a day earlier.

At the same press conference Dr Mahathir said he has proof that Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia lecturer Siddiq Fadzil had instigated students to hate the prime minister.

While teaching Islamic History, Siddiq, a former president of Abim, the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, had likened him to power-crazy and greedy Egyptian pharaohs cursed by god, Dr Mahathir said.

It was not for nothing that Dr Mahathir chose the function at Gurun, where he launched a new national motor-cycle model, to bring to public attention the issue of Bumiputera undergraduates being deviated from their studies by parties with ulterior motives

Officiating at the function, he placed Modenas, the national motorcycle manufacturer and Proton, the national car maker, as the vanguard for bringing about a paradigm shift among Bumiputeras.

"Modenas is the catalyst for transforming the Malays from being mere farmers and civil servants during the colonial days to skilled technologists after independence," he said at the function.

As for Dr Mahathir, Malay survival depends much on their mastery of

knowledge and technology as well as their ability to compete with the other communities in similar fields.

His concern is summed up in his word of caution that a community which fails to master IT will be at the mercy of the community that controls IT because IT will rule the world.

"What is saddening is that while we want to produce more intellectuals and hand out scholarships to have more doctors and engineers and bear 90 per cent of university fees, there are elements who emerge to incite the students.

"We want the students to concentrate fully on their studies. That's why we (Umno) don't want to distract them," he said at the function explaining Umno's reason for not having close rapport with or not encouraging students to be active in politics.

While sceptics may argue that the governing Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition is increasingly apprehensive about student power, they may also ask opposition parties how truly concerned are they about straggling Bumiputera students.

On the afternoon of the first day of his visit, a bemused Dr Mahathir arrived at Kampung Ketol, Batu 17, in his parliamentary constituency of Kubang Pasu, greeted by a sea of Umno and PAS flags flying side by side.

Addressing the residents later, the Umno president said the flags of the rival parties were living testimony of the tolerance of communities of divergent political beliefs.

"This is the kind of harmony we cherish in our society. While we have separate political beliefs, let's not quarrel when we talk politics.

"My only advice is that please do not misuse mosques for politics. The mosque is an important institution for Muslims, a place to cultivate brotherhood," he said.

The prime minister told the residents that he did not come there to campaign for the general election.

"I myself don't know yet when election will be held. I have no inspiration yet to call for one. It is better that the plentiful green cloth we have here be made into children's clothings," he said in parting, referring to the scores of PAS flags on poles planted in between Umno's.

-- BERNAMA

ZKS RYN