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Nagging doubts cleared, sights focused on election battle

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THE fact his two-year-old daughter was fast asleep on his shoulder did not stop a young executive from shouting at the top of his voice "Hidup Mahathir!" at the Umno general assembly yesterday.

The executive, Khairul Hisham Hassan, 29, said he sensed that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had been under siege lately, and felt he had to "voice" out his support.

In fact, as the Umno president progressed slowly through a posse of photographers and admirers at the end of the assembly, many others rushed to pour out encouragement.

"I am not an Umno member," said Khairul Hisham, "and the rest of my family and my wife's family are supporting Pas." The young girl carried on sleeping as momentous events swirled around her.

Dr Mahathir has just sent delegates and party members home in high spirits through his second stirring speech in three days.

And giving them talking points to counter issues related to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and those raised by Pas.

"Don't fear Pas," said Dr Mahathir in his winding-up speech, providing a blow-by-blow analysis of what is seen as Umno's unassailable edge over Pas.

The Prime Minister gave more insight into the Anwar controversy, expanding on what he said in his presidential speech on Friday which will be made available on video-tape.

Using irresistible logic, Dr Mahathir and also party treasurer Tun Daim Zainuddin, countered allegations against them.

Daim described as "outlandish" the accusation that he had tried to take RM1 billion out of the country.

Looking back, the assembly set out to tackle two issues - Anwar and Pas, and rally the forces to face the general election.

Asked anyone for an assessment, the overview would inevitably be upbeat. "From now, you can sense the upbeat mood and strength of the party," said Deputy Home Minister and Padang Besar divisional chief Datuk Azmi Khalid.

Delegates said Dr Mahathir's frankness and sincerity would have a far-reaching impact in the run-up to the polls which must be held by next June.

There seems to be a renewed confidence in the party. And on Friday, amid an anticipation of a surprise announcement, Dr Mahathir got one of the biggest television audience ever. The speech was again telecast on Saturday night.

How could a gathering alter balances? Previously, party sources said, there had been a sense of helplessness on the ground in some areas. The unmistakable truth is that many in the party had been close to Anwar.

Also, some party members took advantage by labelling rivals as "Anwar's men" to gain the upperhand in the tussle for posts and the prospect of being made election candidates.

Such lobbying is not expected to stop, but it will no longer be coloured by the Anwar issue.

"I believe the labelling will now stop," said a source. A behind-the-scene figure said Umno was a fair party which would not resort to victimisation.

How has the Anwar factor really affected the party? A woman delegate gave an indication - coming to the assembly, there were personalities

anxious not to be associated with Anwar.

"But the reality is people were supporting Anwar because he was with Dr Mahathir," she said. That is the prevailing feeling.

"It is normal to have a `guru'," said Datuk Suhaimi Ibrahim, an ex-president of the Malaysian Youth Council, and once regarded as an "Anwar's man". "But I am more of an Umno man."

Datuk Fuad Hassan, a prominent figure in the Youth movement and a Selangor State Exco member, was assistant secretary-general of Abim when Anwar was its president. In fact it was Fuad who took down the minutes when Anwar announced his resignation from Abim in 1981.

"But I did not join Umno the same time he did, and I told the liaison committee (Selangor's) the day after Anwar's removal that I love the party more ... and that was before the guilty verdict," said Fuad.

Significantly, Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who was Youth leader at last year's assembly, admitted yesterday that he was asked by Anwar to raise the issue of cronyism, nepotism and injustices in wealth distribution in a speech then.

"I met the Prime Minister and I have apologised," Zahid said. Sources said Zahid had been trying to meet the Prime Minister for some time now. Is the Anwar issue over?

Said a delegate from Kedah: "Certain personalities associated with Anwar in the past may want to reiterate their commitment to Umno."

Insiders said many of the Anwar "hard-core" supporters felt they had been misled by his style including, the carrots dangled before them.

Last night, inspired by the manner the assembly concluded, Datuk Saad Man who is Dr Mahathir's political secretary, said the party's internal problems were now over and everyone would have to stay focused to face the election.

In a way, a party source said, Umno had been strengthened. "You sense that Umno is poised to go all out to fight the election," said an official. A party source said the situation in the party was now different from what it was at last year's assembly.

"Then, with Anwar still the No. 2, there were strong undercurrents," said a former senior official.

The political scenario has been different since Anwar's sacking on Sept 2 last year, and Umno will be banking on the assembly to precipitate a return to normality.

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