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Not wrong to say theme was to prepare for election

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UMNO president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad kept delegates glued to their seats at the Dewan Merdeka of the Putra World Trade Centre throughout the party's 53rd General Assembly, keeping them in suspense of the `surprise' he was to make during the proceedings.

This element of `surprise' had led to a guessing game among the 2,034 delegates in Dewan Merdeka where proceedings took place and the "unofficial observers", who monitored the speeches and debate through the closed circuit televisions placed at strategic places at the Putra World Trade Centre, the venue of the general assembly since 1985.

Many had speculated that the prime minister would be calling for an election or would be announcing another Cabinet reshuffle.

"No surprise is also a surprise," Dr Mahathir had said when asked at the end of the first day of the assembly.

At the end of the day yesterday, no `surprise' was forthcoming, making it no different that those in the previous years although delegates were supposed to exercise their rights to vote for party leaders at this year's assembly. The party had decided prior to the meet that there will be no party election.

But there were, in fact, a few if these can be considered as "surprises."

First, the Prime Minister spoke at length at the opening of the assembly on the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim despite having said earlier before the assembly that his former deputy was "history."

During one of his press conferences during the assembly, Dr Mahathir said he was merely conveying his experience. "I would have stepped down last year if my good deputy had behaved himself but he thought of other things much more pleasurable and therefore, he missed the pleasure of becoming my successor."

Anwar is currently facing a six-year jail sentence for corruption and currently facing a sodomy charge.

The second "surprise" is the list of share allocation to Bumiputeras by the Finance Ministry from 1993 to 1998, which was released by the Treasury during the assembly. Dubbed a "crony" list, it contains names of 6,440 private limited companies involved in privatization projects.

But this is not the first time such a list is released. Last year, a similar list was made available during the assembly.

Former Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi added his own element of "surprise" to the assembly by admitting to being a beneficiary during Anwar's tenure in the Government and the party, a year after he raised the issue on nepotism and cronyism at the party's general assembly last year.

Zahid was named in the list as having 6.75 million shares or 4.5 per cent of Tekala Corp Bhd as at February 10 1996. He is also named a major shareholder of Pantai Dalam Sdn Bhd, which has been given the privatization contract to re-develop Kampung Abdullah Hukum.

Zahid also holds chairmanship of Kretam Holdings and Bank Simpanan Nasional.

Overall, it is not wrong to say that the theme of this year's assembly centred on preparing the party and its members for the coming general election, which has to be held from any time now to July 2000.

Although the Government is confident of a two-thirds majority in the general election, it is not a risk the party would want to take especially

when the opposition continues to indoctrinate the country's young generation to go against the leadership.

Umno vice president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in his speech when jointly opening the assemblies of the Youth and Wanita movements, asked that party members organise more programmes to create awareness among the young on the party's objectives, struggles and approaches.

"Our objectives remain the same but our approaches differ according to time," he had said.

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