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Party must sustain the momentum of its offensive

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UMNO seems busy setting the record straight. With the general election imminent, and after enduring months of vitriol and body blows delivered by headlines in Harakah, charges on the Internet and Pas ceramah, Umno is going on the offensive at this assembly.

With the mood in the party on the upswing following Friday's presidential address, one could sense that Umno believes it did not have to be apologetic explaining its position.

Some even fought fire with fire. Hence, savaged was Datuk Shahnnon Ahmad's satirical tome, Shit. "I wish his (Shahnnon's) national laureate award had been withdrawn," said a speaker, 35-year-old Azihani Ali, daughter of a former Perlis Menteri Besar.

On Friday, the party debunked the conspiracy theory in the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue, argued why the future of the Malays is inextricably linked with Umno, and defended the merits of so-called mega projects like Putrajaya. Then, yesterday, some speakers assailed what they saw as the negative elements of Pas. For, the feeling is that Umno should not pull their punches in fighting Pas which is, after all, a political party.

"What is the form of Islamic State that Pas wants?," asked a speaker when debating the resolution on religion.

The sense of anticipation and Friday's heightened interest might be missing yesterday, but the speakers debating the resolution had a job to do.

They might not be witty or pugnacious, but did enough to make their points - Umno has reasons to believe it has done more for Islam than Pas and that the sanctity of the ulama institution has to be defended.

Therefore, speakers alluded to how there has been an increased application of Islamic banking system including in banks owned by non-Muslims and spoke of the need to redefine the term ulama.

Further justification that there is now an Umno onslaught was the release of more names of beneficiaries of privatised projects including those awarded when Anwar Ibrahim was the Finance Minister.

"Anwar said his family members never did benefit from him. Now the list indicates otherwise," said an observer.

In the presidential address, Umno has had a good start in setting the record straight. "I was so delighted that my wife said she now sees things in the right perspective after months of uncertainties since the Anwar issue cropped up," said Abu Talib Alias, 35, a delegate from Johor Baru.

Ultimately with the nationwide polls looming (many "feel" the general election will be held in September) the strategy is to rally the forces.

"In Umno it is 'machinery, machinery'," said a delegate.

And, at the height of the assault by the opposition, sections in Umno believed the party did not do enough to defend itself on the ground. Which is why Umno will be particularly keen to sustain the momentum after this assembly.

(The annual Barisan Nasional supreme council meeting is to be held on Thursday).

Ensuring victory in the nationwide polls will also be uppermost in the minds of the leaders when the winding up speeches start at 2.30pm today.

Some delegates were wondering whether the restrictions on Division One officers from holding political posts will be an issue.

For, some in the party think links between the Government and the party

need to be re-established especially when the feeling of being marginalised may exist among civil servants affected by the ruling.

The civil service's vote bank is huge. "Just consider the sheer size of the civil service - 830,000 and their family members who are registered voters," said a senior party official.

"Will certain categories of civil servants, those not involved in approving projects, for instance, be allowed to return to active politics?" asked one.

City-based professionals hesitant to be active within Umno branches of their hometowns have also been a subject of much discussion within the party.

Dr Mahathir had raised the possibility of these people being viewed as a threat to office bearers on the ground, thus keeping them out. It has also been pointed out Pas has been able to attract the professionals.

Also, in preparing for the election and entering the new millennium, some observers said Umno would have to do away with certain habits and inclinations.

Like excessive praising or even hero-worshipping the leaders, a dislike of Dr Mahathir which he alluded to in the presidential briefing on Wednesday. Are there signs that this is on the wane?

Party strategists were yesterday talking of the affiliation to personalities being the root cause of its current situation - the Anwar Ibrahim controversy.

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