

18/06/1999

PM joins 3,000 at anti-defamation talk

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad joined some 3,000 Umno members at an anti-defamation talk at the entrance of the Putra World Trade Centre tonight.

The Umno president, wearing a band with the words, "Sayangi Negara, Perangi Fitnah" on his left arm, sat on the floor in front of the stage to listen to the speakers.

Joining him were Umno vice-president and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and supreme council members. They had earlier attended the supreme council meeting chaired by Dr Mahathir.

The talk was organised to counter the attacks by Opposition parties, especially Pas.

The slight drizzle did not dampen the spirit of party members who reacted with shouts of "Hidup Umno", "Hidup Melayu" and "Hidup Malaysia" when Dr Mahathir showed up and during the talk.

The speakers were Datuk Ibrahim Ali and two former prominent Pas leaders from Terengganu, Mohd Ghazali Ahmad and Omar Khalid.

Ibrahim, who is also chairman of the Umno anti-defamation committee, said there was a lot of defamation thrown at the Barisan Nasional Government since former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was expelled from the party and Government.

"Despite all these, being patriotic, Umno members are still able to maintain the party's strength," he added.

Earlier, Ghazali, the former Pas Terengganu deputy commissioner said Pas had used every aspect of Islam, including the Quran, to hoodwink the Malays into believing that supporting the party was part of the religion.

"This is completely wrong. A political party is only that, not religion ... and religion is not a political party, it is a religion," he added.

The former Pas veteran said he regretted every moment he spent in the party, most of it ensuring that the Malays rejected Umno.

Mohd Ghazali said it took him five years to decide on his next course of action after he realised that Pas was wrong in using Islam to influence the Malays.

Another speaker, Omar Khalid, said he left Pas after 37 years in the party as he felt the party had cheated its members.

He claimed he left Pas after Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat told him that the party could not implement hudud laws despite pledging to do so during the 1990 general election.

"I told Nik Aziz this was unfair since a majority of the Kelantan people had voted for the party because of that pledge," he added.

Omar had written a book entitled "Parti Islam: Antara realiti and fantasi" (Islamic party: between reality and fantasy) which was distributed to the delegates attending the General Assembly.

In the book, Omar who was detained under the Internal Security Act in 1987 under Operasi Lalang, listed various wrong interpretations of the Quran by Pas to justify its practise of branding Umno members as infidels.

The PWTC was abuzz with activities the whole day as Umno delegates and observers descended from all parts of the country to attend the party's annual general assembly.

It started with the joint opening of the Youth and Wanita assemblies by Ahmad.

And tomorrow, the general assembly proper will be opened by Dr Mahathir.

After yesterday's joint opening ceremony at Dewan Merdeka, the delegates proceeded to the Dewan Tun Hussein Onn and Dewan Tun Dr Ismail for the Wanita and Youth assemblies respectively.

At the Dewan Tun Hussein Onn, which was filled to capacity, many were forced to sit along the aisle. Observers unable to enter the hall were seen gathering at the lobby to catch the proceedings over the giant screen and several closed-circuit television sets.

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