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Umno-Celebration (News Focus)

UMNO AS SOLID AS EVER AFTER 53 YEARS

By: Abdul Rahman Ahmad

KUALA LUMPUR, May 11 (Bernama) -- Umno turned 53 today with vigour, its strength undiminished by challenges from within and outside the country that were seeking to undermine the party.

Whatever challenges Umno was subjected to failed to blow it off course, as evident from the fact that members who left the party subsequently returned to its fold in the realisation that Umno is the only party which can guarantee the Malays' future.

As is the tradition, this year's anniversary celebration began with a flag-raising ceremony on the grounds of the Umno headquarters at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

The red and white Umno flag with a keris in the middle, a symbol of Malay supremacy, was hoisted by party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the accompaniment of official Umno songs "Bersatu, Bersetia, Berkhidmat" and "Umno Teras Negara" which were sung by a party choir.

Tonight, a tahlil ceremony will be held.

All state Umno liaison committees and the party's divisions and branches held their own activities to mark the occasion.

Although there are bound to be negative interpretations of this year's celebrations, the picture painted by detractors is far from the truth.

Umno Supreme Council member Datuk Mohd Ali Rustam said May 11 is a very significant and meaningful day for party members because it reminds them that Umno has remained strong and stable in the face of all sorts of challenges.

The biggest challenge faced was when Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and several other leaders left the party in 1987 to form Semangat 46 which subsequently became Umno's main challenger.

Compared to what Umno went through then, the problems faced by Umno following the expulsion of deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim last year were not that serious, he said.

Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail has formed Parti Keadilan Nasional, but according to observers the party could not be likened to Semangat 46 in terms of influence and strength.

This was because in 1987 Tengku Razaleigh brought along with him Umno leaders, while the removal of Anwar from the government and party in September 1998 did not have such major implications on the party.

"When Tengku Razaleigh left the party many followed him on the basis of struggle, but in the case of Datuk Seri Anwar, Umno members who followed him comprised only a handful, and they left not on the basis of struggle," he said.

Realising that Malay interests can only be protected by Umno, Tengku Razaleigh and thousands of his supporters returned to Umno in 1996 when the party celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Mohd Ali said not many Umno leaders and members wanted to follow Anwar because they could tell which Umno leaders were sincere and committed in struggling for the Malays.

"Most Umno members support Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir because he is a leader with self-confidence and who has proven his capability in developing the country and championing the people's cause," he said.

Mohd Ali, who is Deputy Health Minister, is confident that the Malays would continue to support Umno and the Barisan Nasional (BN) in the next

general election because they realise only Umno can ensure their future.

On other hand, the people can see that PAS, DAP and Keadilan make strange bedfellows when they decide to form an opposition front against the BN.

On its part, Keadilan has declared that it wants to make Anwar the Prime Minister, while PAS and DAP may have their own candidates for the post if they can come to power.

-- BERNAMA

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