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Will the grassroots warriors be convinced by president's address?

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SURPRISED? Not complaining that there was no real surprise were the mak ciks and other nondescript grassroot warriors who are a familiar sight at Umno general assemblies.

Squatting at the foyer and routinely captured on camera, they would be all ears for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who appears on the big screen, cajoling and at times shocking them, as he delivers another presidential address.

As for the delegates, the media, and the teeming crowd (there was a bigger turnout this time) the surprise could still be sprung.

"Maybe in the winding up address on Sunday?" said a delegate, may be, to keep the hope alive.

Nonetheless, everyone knew they had just listened to a major political speech by Dr Mahathir with the general election looming.

Even as the speech was being delivered, it quickly became evident that it would be keenly dissected afterwards.

When Dr Mahathir admitted "I was rather naive" vis-a-vis the role of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, his then No. 2 in a controversial speech by Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi at last year's assembly, a lone voice at the back shouted "Hidup Mahathir".

The applause gained momentum and frequency, as Dr Mahathir went deeper into an issue which troubled many Malaysians for months.

The significance of the speech against the political backdrop is likely to be gauged from the following perspectives.

How will it tilt the balance in the run-up to the polls? Will the Umno forces become now poised to fight the election? Who was the targeted audience? How big was the audience? Was there a surprise element?

First, this matter of a surprise. Some, a few Cabinet Ministers included, saw the extent of Dr Mahathir's explanation on the Anwar Ibrahim issue as a surprise.

"His previous explanations on the issue lacked depth," said a behind-the-scenes figure who, like many others in the party, were evidently inspired by the tone of the speech.

The surprise "hype", wittingly perpetuated or otherwise, gave Dr Mahathir a huge audience, especially those who followed the speech on television.

"By tomorrow (Saturday) we will get a clearer picture of the reaction on the ground," said an official.

The profile of the audience must have been impressively varied - opposition figures, professionals, committed and the less-enthusiastic members of opposition, stock brokers, university students, Umno members, civil servants.

To party strategists, however, the message has to most importantly be conveyed to party members including sections still puzzled by the Anwar affair; the ubiquitous fence-sitters; non-Umno members traditionally supporting Barisan Nasional; and the odd disenchanting supporters of Pas and other opposition parties.

In this, a strategist confessed to have been restless during those times when, he said, the Prime Minister largely focused on the economic recovery efforts.

"Now that the economic crisis is over, the Prime Minister decided to go on the offensive," he said. Generally, the assessment was that Dr Mahathir

had been waiting for the most appropriate forum to explain the Anwar issue comprehensively and why there was no conspiracy hatched.

To Datuk Saad Man, Dr Mahathir's political secretary, over the last 16 years, Anwar had built an impressive network of supporters and admirers.

In the civil service, traditionally a valued support base, many benefited from personal favours dished out by Anwar in the various ministries he went to. Saad said such people could not be faulted from being rather disturbed by the turn of events.

"For, a fabric woven over 16 years cannot be dismantled overnight," said Saad.

Observers said witnessing how he had been singled out for scorn, the Prime Minister decided to clarify things. "He had to defend himself too, you know," said a Selangor delegate.

"He was being demonised by some including elements abroad," said Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad, the special envoy to the United Nations who was visibly thrilled by Dr Mahathir's speech, saying: "It was typical Mahathir ... and he was not being arrogant."

To Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, the Johor Menteri Besar, the opposition had devised a strategy to "destroy" Dr Mahathir in order to defeat Umno.

"Yet," said Ghani, "It was amply clear the party still supports him (Dr Mahathir)."

What is in store for Umno now? If the party has had concerns in run-up to the polls, surely the one speech cannot singlehandedly turn things around? How about the support of the professionals? And the perceived strength of the oppositon?

"Umno may not capture Kelantan ... but it will retain the two-thirds majority," said Abdullah Ahmad.

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