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Coming to grips with the changing aspirations of Malays

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THE red carpet leading from one of the main doors of Dewan Merdeka where the Umno general assembly took place, was often lined with people hoping to see or shake the hands of Umno leaders making their way out of the hall.

Each time there was a break in the sitting, the crowd would surge towards the red carpet as the Umno big-names, many of them Cabinet Ministers, came through the door.

This is the time when the most ordinary of Umno members get the opportunity to meet figures whom they normally only read about in the papers or watch on TV news.

Yet, these were the very same figures subjected to intense scrutiny by delegates to the 54th party general assembly.

The gathering of Umno faithful began with high expectations. There had been a sense that this assembly would set the tone for Umno's future course after an unsettling couple of years.

The party was badly bruised in the last general election and the rivalry for the Malay mandate has never been more urgent, while pressure for more democratic space never more openly articulated.

At the same time, the yearning for fresh direction and impetus within the party has been undeniable.

"Umno at the crossroads," was a frequently-heard phrase from many Umno politicians through the four-day gathering.

Yet, the signals sent out the last few days had been a mixed bag to say the least.

Umno's rank-and-file are likely to be thinking about what this meeting means for the future of Umno - the critical tone of the debate, the startling combination of the new supreme council, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz's nail-biting narrow win, and the return of Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

The younger politicians are already adapting.

"I think all of us are ready to go back and put what has been said here into action," said newly-elected supreme council member Azim Zabidi.

But among the senior generation, there was a certain nostalgia, a longing for the way things used to be, of the old comradeship and the deep sense of struggle and sacrifice, and of the intrinsic willingness to put the party above self.

"I am sad," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar. "The approach to Umno politics has changed. People are loyal to the party because of what they can get, not what they can contribute."

A few even talked about a generational hand-over, of a post-modern Umno in the making. The first generation of Umno leaders oversaw the birth of the party and nation. They were followed by the generation who gave Umno its modern face and reputation.

And if there is indeed a post-modern generation of Umno leaders in the making, then the challenge facing them is tremendous, even daunting, because out there is an increasingly educated and informed Malay electorate whose expectations of leadership are greatly different from that of their parents.

Their sense of loyalty is no longer tied exclusively to race and religion, but to more universal perceptions of openness, accountability and justice.

Said the notoriously outspoken Datuk Shahrir Samad who returned to the Supreme Council on Thursday: "Umno cannot but respond to these signals, especially from the community whose support we seek. There's a critical attitude towards the leadership which we simply have to deal with.

"If we want to continue to be relevant, we have to deal with critical attitudes towards leadership. We cannot sweep things under the carpet if we wish to continue to be relevant. We've got to stop thinking about what the leaders want, but about what the people want."

Umno, Shahrir said, had to look after the interests of all Malays rather than just that of its members if it wanted to regain the Malay mandate.

The new generation of Umno leaders will have to deal with this dilemma - negotiating Malay aspirations from within and without the party.

None of the leaders sitting on stage the last few days could have failed to note that delegates also wanted leaders to come down from their pedestal, to stay in touch with the very people whose support had enabled them to get up there.

Said Johor delegate Adam Hamid: "There is a gap between the leadership and the grassroots. It must be narrowed."

He spoke of the trend where VIPs, usually Ministers, arrive at a function to be ushered into a special room, then after a speech, they are ushered into another special room for refreshments.

"The only interaction is during the speech. Even here today, they have a special room and many delegates feel they are far from the leadership," he said.

What also worried many Umno figures was the way some of the delegates jeered when the subject of money politics was raised. It was as though they resented the strenuous efforts against this corrupt practice.

"It shocked me," said Syed Hamid who is widely thought to have lost out in the VP race because he had stuck to an accountable campaign.

"I'm afraid this is one issue with the potential of developing into a vicious cycle," said another VP candidate who lost.

Said a young Malay professional: "I'm fed-up with all this talk about money politics. It is rampant and so much has been said about it, yet not a single person was penalised. Don't expect us to take such warnings seriously until the party has the political will to act, even if it involves a big name."

Like all political parties, Umno has its ups and downs and goes into soul-searching accordingly. Now is one such time.

The proceedings of the assembly suggest that Umno leaders and delegates know exactly what has gone awry with the party in the past few years.

There is also no doubt that the prevailing mood among delegates at this year's assembly had been thoroughly absorbed by the party leadership if the winding-up speeches of the leadership, particularly that of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, were any indication.

The party president began his winding-up somewhat tentatively but as he gained momentum, it was clear that this unmatched leader of Umno was not in the least afraid or reticent about taking into account all that had been aired the last few days, be it the good, the bad and the critical.

He had not missed a single point or cue from the floor and he responded accordingly. In fact, a reading of his speech will show that this was Dr Mahathir at his most responsive and passionate.

And a senior editor noted: "It is one of his most powerful and emotional speeches."

The standing ovation moments before the end of his speech when he was at his most urgent said as much.

But as Dr Mahathir pointed out, the delegates who had made such direct and cogent calls for reform among the party leadership must also remember

that they themselves were part of the party.

So if Umno is to change for the better, then the onus is not on the leadership alone, but ordinary members will have to do their part.

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