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Laying a sound foundation for Umno in new millennium

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THE 54th Umno General Assembly, the first of the new millennium, has sought to lay the foundation for the party and the Malays to face the challenges ahead.

Before the General Assembly, the talk throughout the country was on the party elections which would be held to elect Umno's Supreme Council members for the 2000-2003 term. But it was more than that.

In his presidential speech, Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad called on Umno members to return to the ideals upon which the party was founded 54 years ago. This, he said, was vital for its strength and survival.

"Malays who desire continued progress must build a brighter future; Malays who wish to redeem and maintain their dignity must be disciplined, must control their desires, and be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the future of their race, religion and nation," he said.

Observers say the Prime Minister had sought to redefine the Malays, a new kind of Malay, if you will. Malays who have the ability to control their desires, avoid negative values, hold strongly to Islamic principles and practise values that are virtuous. They should be disciplined and fully believe that God will help those who help themselves, and learn to acquire the knowledge that can make them successful.

The new Malays, Dr Mahathir said, should not be associated with drunkards, womanisers and gamblers, which some critics have labeled as the typical urban, successful Malay.

This is the huge responsibility that now rests with Umno - to increase the number of these new Malays. Dr Mahathir said a start must be made with the leaders and members of Umno so that they become the new Malays before anyone else.

This begs the question: Does the Umno Supreme Council members elected by the more than 2,000 delegates at the assembly have some or all of these qualities?

The question was asked of Dr Mahathir during a press conference on Friday.

"I have no proven evidence that they have been involved in corruption. Of course there are lots of people who make assumptions, but I cannot work on people's assumptions. I must have proof of wrongdoing. I can't condemn people without proof," he said.

Asked on Saturday if he felt the new Supreme Council line-up is capable of achieving the goals set out for the party and the Malays, Dr Mahathir said:

"I think they can. Of course, we cannot achieve an ideal anything. There will be differences of opinions. The duty of a leader is to bring all these different opinions together and channel it to achieve the objectives we have."

Many agree that the Umno Supreme Council elected by the delegates is a strong team, made up of a good mix of old and new, and of different backgrounds and views.

They are united in their support of the president and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who were both elected unopposed at the general assembly. The question of succession after Dr Mahathir has been settled.

The three vice-presidents - Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin - have extensive experience in

the party and the government.

All three were at one time Menteri Besar - Najib in Pahang, Muhammad in Selangor, and Muhyiddin in Johor. Najib was at one time Umno Youth leader, and has been at the helm of the ministries of defence and education.

Muhammad was a surprise winner by virtue of the negative publicity he had received after being charged in an Australian court, but he has also been credited for much of the development in Selangor, making it among the most developed states in the country. Muhyiddin, the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister, also suffered from some negative publicity pertaining to certain land deals during his tenure as Johor Menteri Besar, but he made a huge impact on Johor's progress with his aggressive and ambitious development plans.

Muhyiddin was also remembered for what some have described as the best Commonwealth Games ever staged when Malaysia hosted it in 1998. He was the Youth and Sports Minister then.

It was also not forgotten that Najib, Muhammad and Muhyiddin were also part of the so-called Wawasan Team which was supposed to have been sponsored by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and which won the vice-president posts in 1993.

But circumstances are different now. They may be the same individuals, but they are different from who they were seven years ago, and during that period they have been tried and tested, and their loyalty to the party is unquestionable.

Together with the other Supreme Council members, they must now focus on closing ranks and developing among the Malays the qualities that will enable them to become more resilient in facing challenges ahead.

Dr Mahathir's plea in his closing speech at the general assembly for Umno members to become self-reliant and not be comforted that they have someone to depend on, could very well be an advice to Umno leaders as well.

The Umno president had indicated that this could be his last term, both as president and Prime Minister.

"My ultimate goal is to put the country on track towards achieving Vision 2020. For that, Umno must be strong and remain in power. Members must understand what we stand for, what we want to do, and how to do it," he said.

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