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Leadership accurately gauges pulse of the grassroots

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IN terms of excitement, the Umno special general assembly yesterday would probably be remembered as a comparatively lacklustre affair.

It cannot compare in terms of drama and suspense which some general assemblies in the past had offered.

Many would remember, for example, the special assembly held in 1994 on money politics, which had delegates on the edge of their seats, listening attentively to how money was spent to curry votes.

At that time, juicy remarks such as "envelopes strewn all over the assembly venue bathrooms" added with the then novelty handphones being bandied about by delegates, enhanced the sense of excitement in the proceedings.

This time around, however, much of the drama was behind doors literally closed to the media (and thus public) consumption.

The decision - deemed last minute by some - to hold proceedings in closed door sessions, caught many journalists and Umno observers off-guard.

The grapevine started tingling. Speculation was rife as to why such a decision, uncharacteristic of Umno assemblies, was made. Talk on the ground was that party leaders were concerned that the debates would degenerate into a "free-for-all", which would expose some of the more unsavoury aspects within the party.

There was a fear that such a "soul-bearing" exercise would be exploited by Opposition parties, such as Pas.

Pundits at the assembly sidelines alleged that such concerns was also the reason why the debates were conducted in such a "controlled" manner.

This assumption was based on the fact that proposals, which were not already decided to be tabled, would not be allowed to be suggested during the assembly.

Party vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, however, explained that this was a much justified ruling in the conduct of the assembly proceedings.

Speaking to reporters on the eve of the assembly, he said that if each of the 2,023 delegates was allowed to present their proposals, "we would end up with over 2,000 proposals to be voted on".

Muhyiddin also said that some of the proposals were rejected after taking into account the party's overall interests.

He cited a rejected suggestion for Umno to adopt changes to include the term "Islam" in its motto, in efforts to convince Malays that Umno, not Pas, was the champion of the religion.

"If this proposal was tabled, it would have caused Pas to accuse us of acknowledging that we were not 'Islam' all this time," said Muhyiddin.

It turned out that Muhyiddin's explanation turned up during the debates the next day. During the Umno State liaison committee-level debate, it is understood that some suggested that in order to win the war against Pas, Umno had to make its ideology concerning Islam clearer.

The council's wisdom in vetting the proposals and in not allowing 'outside' proposals to be discussed during proceedings is understandable.

More so the decision that the assembly would only vote on the establishment of the much-discussed Puteri Umno movement, leaving organisational details for later deliberation.

But even with such restrictions imposed on delegates, some of the State

representatives managed to insert subtle references to their State's preferences on details of Puteri Umno.

A State representative openly suggested that the age limit for Puteri Umno be made at 25 years of age and below.

Others cleverly qualified their preferences by saying that the party should consider these proposals "in its next constitutional amendment exercise".

These "slips" did not result in any untoward incident. Some praised this as a sign of Umno's unity of purpose at the assembly.

Others said the assembly was "duller" than they had expected due to the technical nature of many of the proposals which would leave the uninitiated befuddled.

After all, apart from the five-year term of service proposal for the supreme council and divisional heads - which the supreme council earlier dropped due to feedback from the party grassroots - the only other proposal which drew wide public interest was the clause providing for the formation of Puteri Umno.

Furthermore, the debates themselves, though lively, were very much subdued, adding to the conclusion that the assembly was a colourless affair.

But while the critics are wont to suggest the comparatively staid atmosphere of the assembly as evidence that the party had asserted a rigid control on proceedings, giving no room for delegates to voice dissenting views, this was not the case.

Debaters were cheered and "politely" chastised by the delegates during their presentation, in equal measure.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the floor was open to all delegates to speak their mind during the committee stage debate which took place before voting.

Yes, Senai division head, Adam Hamid (who was front-paged by a newspaper for his intention to file an individual motion to oppose some of the proposals), was given the opportunity to speak his mind.

In other words, the delegates had full opportunity to oppose motions and seek support from other delegates in rejecting them.

As such, it can be said that democracy within Umno was well at work yesterday, whether by design or default.

As party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself pointed out in his speech, the constitutional amendment exercise was necessary "to ensure that our aims are not affected by the attitude change in the party and society".

Doubtless that the party president was referring, among others, to the growing number of Bumiputeras and Malays who are reputedly becoming very attuned to concepts such as openness, transparency and also the need for consultation.

It was thus heartening to note that despite the two-thirds majority vote required, only one proposal failed to make the grade and be incorporated into the constitution - that regarding the criteria used to select branch members who can attend divisional meetings.

This proves two things:

- * the party leadership accurately gauged the pulse of the grassroots in the changes they felt needed; and,

- * by conducting the constitutional amendment exercise by thoroughly referring to the grassroots, Umno is showing that it is an open party which practices consultation with its 2.7 million members.

So, perhaps in the case of the just concluded Umno special general assembly, it's not so bad to be lacklustre, after all.

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