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`Learn from others' downfall' (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad sounded another "wake-up call" to members today, reminding them of the fate awaiting the party if they continue to believe that it is invincible.

He said they must take a leaf from the fall of parties which had fought for independence like the Kuomintang in Taiwan, the Muslim League in Pakistan and Congress Party in India.

"We need to learn from other people's experiences, (the downfall of) parties similar to Umno which had fought for their countries' independence.

"We learn (from their weaknesses) so that we will not suffer the same fate," he said at a Press conference after briefing delegates to the party's general assembly on Thursday.

The Prime Minister was asked to elaborate on his reminder to members on Umno's vulnerability and how vital it was that Umno members understand its struggles and role in nation-building.

The general assembly will be preceded by the Youth and Wanita assemblies tomorrow where delegates will elect their respective office-bearers. On Thursday, the highlight will be the elections for the three vice-president and supreme council posts. On the need to remind members continuously not to be complacent, Dr Mahathir said this was necessary as "some tended to fall asleep again".

"Some, especially the younger ones, do not understand the party's philosophy and struggles for race, country and religion."

He said the efforts had borne results as they were now more conscious of their responsibilities.

On whether he would make good his promise to expose at the assembly those involved in money politics, Dr Mahathir said he needed solid proof before doing so, something which he admitted was now lacking.

"At the moment, I will not make any allegations if I can't substantiate them. But there are other ways for us to act on this," he said.

On whether the party had managed to eradicate the menace, he said: "Ada juga sikit tapi payah nak pinpoint (There are cases but difficult to pinpoint them)."

To a suggestion that those defeated in the elections might be regarded as being involved in money politics as he had before this repeatedly told delegates to reject such leaders, Dr Mahathir said it would be unfair to form such an opinion.

"There are 65 candidates vying for 25 seats (supreme council). There will be losers because of the limited seats, so we cannot blame them."

On his expectations from the party polls, Dr Mahathir said he believed it would see the election of clean, unselfish and service-oriented leaders.

"I cannot guarantee but I believe only those who are clean will be chosen this time around."

While admitting that the party's image had taken a beating, Dr Mahathir said Umno was still relevant, adding that only it could bring progress to the country.

"There is no guarantee other political parties could achieve what we have done so far."

Alluding to steps taken by the Government in addressing the 1997 economic crisis, Dr Mahathir said the country would have succumbed to

demands from the International Monetary Fund had Pas been given the power to decide on the matter.

Dr Mahathir also said he expected poison-pen letters to surface at the assembly as such practice was part of the Malay culture.

"It is not only confined to Umno but all Malays ... a lot of such letters are also circulated by the Opposition," he said.

He said the Opposition also had no respect for the Malay culture, even going to the extent of tearing banners on the assembly.

The Prime Minister was also asked what the party hoped to portray over the choice of Islamic designs adorning the backdrop of the stage in the Merdeka Hall of the PWTC. Describing it as just a backdrop, he said one should not be too taken in by image and neglect the more important things in the religion like practising its true teachings.

"We are not trying to outdo Pas ... if they wear skullcaps and turbans, we also must copy them and even wear bigger turbans. All these do not reflect true Islam but what is more important is holding to values like brotherhood and not labelling another Muslim as an infidel."

Earlier, in his 90-minute speech at the close-door briefing, Dr Mahathir also touched on the evils of money politics and the heavy responsibility of Umno and its members in developing the country.

He also relaunched the official party organ, Wawasan Merdeka, which had been given a new look. It was previously known as Merdeka.