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Party members decide on shape of things to come

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TO meet and then to part is always an occasion for emotion among the sentimental. It must have been expressed quite openly by some of the Wanita Umno delegates and observers as the curtain came down on the 54th party general assembly.

Every year, similar emotions are expressed by these women delegates at the end of such conventions.

It is an expression of love, care and the yearning to meet again the following year.

That is what Umno assemblies are all about and this year was no different.

However, there are other considerations than merely meeting old friends and acquaintances.

There is an agenda to fulfil and a struggle to pursue.

In the just-concluded assembly, the agenda started with filling up the vacuum in the succession caused by the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

It was a successful exercise in political engineering on the part of the party leadership which in the beginning was criticised for giving the no-contest advice.

During the run-up to the assembly, especially when the divisions were having meetings to decide whom to nominate, the criticism ranged from undemocratic practice to power-grabbing measures.

However, by yesterday, it was obvious that all of this had been neutralised. Dr Mahathir, as usual, when he took the podium in his winding-up speech made it clear - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is his successor and there is no more vacuum in the leadership.

The winding-up was vintage Dr Mahathir, building up from self-criticism, soul-searching and up to the battle against neo-colonialism which he made clear to delegates was something real.

It was understandable why the delegates decided to give him a standing ovation though it was a rarity for it to come even before he ended his speech.

The assembly did not confine the exercise merely to filling up the succession vacuum, but also ventured into determining the second echelon as well as who should be in the supreme council, a body operating as a council of elders.

There was for a moment, after the result on the vice-presidency was known and that the three were former members of the Anwar-led Wawasan Team, the fear that Anwar's ghost had returned to haunt the party.

Such fears turned out to be baseless when delegates and observers alike discovered that Kubang Pasu, the division led by Dr Mahathir himself, had nominated Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin for the three posts.

Dr Mahathir denied that he had any hand in the division's nominations but the more he tried the more convinced the delegates were that they were his choice, and this should work to his advantage further.

The first day of the assembly was equally eventful, with the focus on the battle between Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman for the coveted post of Wanita chief.

The contest threatened to be overwhelmed by probably the most trivial of issues - the wearing of the tudung - in which the choice of the two

leaders are based on how they decided what they wear on top of their head.

No one knows whether the outcome of the contest, which Rafidah won by only 12 votes, was decided on the ability of the leader or otherwise.

If it had been a clear-cut majority, then one could have concluded that the considerations were definitely based on capability. But the slim margin leaves things unclear and one wonders whether Rafidah will resort to similar measures, just to get more votes.

The results of the contest for the supreme council are equally interesting. Attempts to regard the victors as former associates of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim do not hold water.

It must have been heartwarming though, to see the return of "renegades" like former Minister Datuk Shahrir Samad and former Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

While Shahrir is noted for his forthright attitude, Zahid, long known as an Anwar man, has proved to be a true Umno man.

In short the results, either by chance or design, reflected the exorcising of Anwar's ghost.

That established, the whole proceedings which followed after the elections, though still buoyed by rhetoric, also dealt with measures to ensure Umno's relevance to the Malay community and the nation.

Much of the debate centred on trying to understand the disenchantment of the Malays for the party, especially the younger generation and the middle-class, as reflected in the last general election.

Of course, at the same time, there were efforts to blame much of the problem on Pas' manipulation of Islam.

But in the final analysis the assembly accepted that it was the weakness of Umno which had led to its bad showing in last year's general election.

On a superficial assessment, the party does seem focused on what its direction should be.

Said Shahrir: There is still hope for Umno.

Coming from a person who is also noted for his cynical remarks, one can't help but accept it as an assessment close to the truth.

These aside, the assembly also seems to realise that negative perceptions and its battered image are its worst nemesis.

Efforts to combat money politics should continue and not merely end as a lip service while touching base with the electorate can help reduce the negative perceptions.

The whole problem with Umno is that it does not have good public relations, and its efforts to improve the community have, of late, placed it at a big disadvantage.

Given the fact that the government is synonymous with Umno, not many of its efforts are seen as a party's contribution.

The question a delegate asked, why Umno cannot have a programme similar to MCA's Langkawi Project, is pertinent.