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Rousing end to assembly (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - In a closing speech that was personal and powerful, passionate and compelling, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad responded to all points raised at the Umno general assembly with such clarity and conviction that delegates showed their approval with loud cheers.

The party president and Prime Minister - advancing his arguments so forcefully that it led delegates to conclude that Dr Mahathir actually spoke from the heart - addressed issues such as Umno's immediate strategy to counter the Opposition, the perception that it is over-dependent on the Government, criticism against national leaders, and loyalty to the party and leaders.

Dr Mahathir started by allaying the delegates' fear of criticising top leaders, including himself. "A few speakers wanted to criticise me, but were so skilful in their presentation that it looked as if they were directing the points at others in the supreme council.

"I'm not angry, hurt or disappointed if I'm criticised personally. I'm indebted to Umno. As Umno president, I belong to Umno, I'm yours. Therefore, if your intentions are good, then criticising the party and its leaders should be acceptable."

His first major response was a call to all Umno members to immediately adopt a different approach when countering the Opposition. He said Umno leaders and members must now learn to operate in a "hostile environment."

"We must imagine that everyone is hostile towards us. That may include quite a vast section of society... our tactics must now be designed to counter such hostility effectively. In this kind of scenario, how are we going to operate?"

"We must take a trip back to 1946. The conditions were really hostile then. But even then, when we had no professionals, no big-time corporate figures and we were weaker, we still managed to get rid of our colonial masters. We achieved that in an extremely hostile environment," he said to the applause of the audience.

Dr Mahathir said Umno must once again close ranks and be united in such an environment for the tough challenges in the next general election.

It was a struggle that Umno must fight on its own without having to depend on the Government, its agencies and others, Dr Mahathir said.

He said Umno could no longer depend on agencies to carry out its social or religious activities and operate the way the Opposition did.

"This is the world we have to face now. This is the new politics for Umno. We cannot depend on others. We have to do it ourselves."

Dr Mahathir said the Opposition had capitalised on Umno's initiatives and efforts, a situation for which Umno had to be blamed.

As an example, he said the Opposition had used mosques and higher institutions of learning to successfully further its cause. He said now was the time for Umno to do the same and "follow-up to the end".

"If we have given scholarships to our students, then we must send a team to universities and meet them. And when we are booed, we must not be intimidated," he said, reflecting on his experience before becoming a minister when he had to meet students during which he was jeered many times.

Dr Mahathir also responded to the call by Wanita Umno for representation in the supreme council in view of the fact that none of its five candidates was elected into the council.

Paying tribute to Wanita Umno, he said the movement had made tremendous contributions to the party and the country. He cited as example, Wanita Umno's vital role during elections when the party depended on Wanita members to win votes.

He said Malaysia had many women who were knowledgeable, educated and skilled, citing the example of Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman, who is the first woman from a developing country to be appointed Director of the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs. She is the director-general of the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry's Space Science Studies Division.

"They are not asking for much. We need to respond to them," said Dr Mahathir.