

---

By Zainal Epi

---

Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's briefing tomorrow to some 2,000 delegates to the party assembly will set the direction for the meeting on Thursday.

Depending on Mahathir's focus at the briefing, the Umno general assembly is expected to be a fiery affair. Delegates have much to say or query as there is no shortage of issues or topics.

Top of the agenda must surely be the sudden resignation of Tun Daim Zainuddin from all government and party posts, except as Merbok MP.

Foremost in the minds of delegates is whether Daim will be present, where he will be seated and the effects on the direction of the debate.

Hardly has party grassroots had time to digest the Daim shocker; they are now jolted by the suspension of six more party leaders found guilty of irregularities during the last divisional elections.

This brings to 12 the total number of party leaders suspended by the Umno disciplinary board.

Daim held the posts of finance minister, minister with special functions, Umno treasurer, national economic action council (NEAC) executive director and Langkawi Development Authority (Lada) chairman.

Daim resigned as finance minister on June 1 after two months' leave and as Umno treasurer-general later, after much speculation.

A lawyer by profession, Daim, 63, has left the finance minister's post twice before.

His first stint was from June 1984 to March 1991 and again in January 1999 after the then finance minister and deputy prime minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, was dismissed for sodomy and misuse of power.

When he was appointed finance minister, Daim was already in the cabinet as special functions minister.

Party grassroots are shocked as they regard Daim as Mahathir's close childhood friend.

They are concerned with rumours that their parting of ways is not friendly and

# Umno assembly – a fiery affair expected

SUN 18 JUN 2001

at a time when the country is facing economic problems – worsened by the economic slowdown in the US.

Talk inside the party is worse than rumours outside.

Party leaders do not just read the Daim issue on the surface. They link the resignation to “a political upheaval which, if not handled carefully, may further tear the party apart”.

“As Umno is the backbone of the government, Daim's resignation is not just about economic effects, but worse still, it is linked to political problems,” said a division chief.

Delegates are expected to query the party leadership on this matter, as well as the political involvement – who the leaders involved are and what the plots are like.

Directly or indirectly, some delegates expect speakers to also question the party leadership on the direction of the party – where grassroots members have raised concerns following the party's dismal performance in the 1999 general election.

While they admit that remedial action has been taken, such as eliminating money politics through disciplinary action and the setting up of Puteri Umno to attract young professionals, they are concerned with the direction of the party.

A division chief said: “Umno seems to be just getting along, pushing on without knowing where it is heading or what it intends to achieve.”

"Its actions – such as taking disciplinary action against so-called practitioners of money politics – is now backfiring with victims denying involvement and some even refusing to talk about it.

"The worse part is after taking action against the purported practitioners, the members who contested against them are declared the winners. The act is considered undemocratic," said a member.

Another contentious issue is the barring of division chiefs from competing for government tenders which grassroots members have called on the delegates to raise.

They said some division chiefs have been earning their living through government projects and if this is stopped, how will they survive?

"Some members even joked that it is better to be a deputy or vice-chief as the person can continue doing business," he added.

Several others said delegates have been told to question the appointments of ministers and senators which party members have avoided raising thus far, as the appointments are the prerogative of the prime minister, who is also Umno president.

They said this time around, party grassroots are quite concerned with the criteria used to appoint persons to such positions.

Said a party veteran: "Those days, ministers were Umno leaders who were elected by members to become division heads and MPs. They knew about the struggles of the people.

"Now, anyone can be appointed to such positions, thus brushing aside the contributions of members who have been with the party through thick and thin.

"Although the prerogative is with the prime minister, but as party president, he is supposed to, at the very least, think of the contributions of party members."

The education quota system is another thorny issue which delegates are expected to blast Barisan Nasional coalition partners.

A division chief said Umno is losing sight of its objectives and slowly losing the support of members because the party seems to be distancing itself from potential supporters.

"The catch line here is hope and fear.

Umno is not giving any hope to old or young Malays now, and Umno is not feared by the Opposition.

"Members believe this is happening because there is no clear-cut direction for the party."

A veteran said when the country was faced with racial fights stemming from uneven distribution of the economic cake, Umno, then headed by the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, quickly took the approach of "hope and fear".

Said a veteran: "The late Tun Razak gave the Malays hope that Umno would remedy the situation through the New Economic Policy and put fear in the Opposition through the Emergency rule.

"Now, when Malays are faced with an identity crisis and other problems, particularly economic, Umno does not seem to give hope to them."

Veterans worry about the future of the party when the directions are not clear, when its propaganda is not working well to attract new members and convince present members, and when its remedial measures for the current state of confusion and uncertainty seem to be backfiring.

Young members, on the other hand, are just going along holding the hands of the elders in the party.

Said a youth movement member: "The movement is not making any giant steps to make its presence felt. It has not been complementing the party in anyway, neither is it moving on its own."

Puteri Umno will not be a subject at all, although some delegates may touch on the issue in a lighter vein, said an observer.

Thus, Thursday's Umno assembly may see restless delegates wanting answers to the many issues in an effort to put the party back on track.