

Coming together for good of the party

Nst 10 APR 2001

THE crowd waiting for the arrival of Dr Mahathir at Bukit Cekati in Gua Musang suddenly broke into laughter.

A group of Wanita Umno members who were chosen to be guard of honour had, in their nervousness, turned left when the pack leader told them to turn right.

On the sidelines the soporific *serunai* (a traditional musical instrument) continued to sing a lilting tune, interspersed with the booming sound of the *rebana* (giant drums).

Almost everyone from Gua Musang were there – young and old, men and women, Malays and Chinese, Indians and Orang Asli – as well as the handicapped.

It was no longer an Umno divisional meeting but an opportunity for the leaders and the *rakyat*.

A beaming Datuk Ibrahim Ali, who was one of those responsible for organising the function, was hopping all over the place.

“What do you think? Isn’t it grand?” he asked without actually wanting an answer.

By the time Dr Mahathir and his entourage arrived in helicopters, the crowd which had loitered at the foot of the hill started walking up and that grabbed the attention of the Prime Minister.

In his speech, he did not miss this and quipped:

“I did not know so many people stay in this *gua* (cave – making a pun of the name Gua Musang).”

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s visit to the Gua Musang Umno division on Saturday has raised much interest within the political circles. Understandably, as the division is led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, one-time bitter rival. But if one cares to look deeper, the two leaders were actually putting on a show of Malay politics, writes SHAMSUL AKMAR.

win and, if necessary, the lower the turnout, especially among those supporting the opposing candidate, the better.

As time progressed, instead of embodying a mass movement, it became more elitist.

But an event as the one in Gua Musang has become rare and also dependent on “big names” like Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh.

Umno has no choice but to return to its old Malay traditions if it wants to continue to lead.

These aspects of the meeting in Gua Musang might have been missed. Also ignored was what the two leaders were trying to present to the rest of the Umno community equally caught up in their divisional elections.

More of interest among them is the perception that Dr Mahathir “favours” the Gua Musang division as a way to send a signal that he was no longer “angry” with Tengku Razaleigh and considered the for-

cluding him rejoined Umno en bloc.

Since then, there had been a few occasions in which Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh shared centre stage, generally proving that the enmity between them no longer exists.

But in Gua Musang on Saturday, it was a different scenario altogether.

Tengku Razaleigh, in his speech, urged Dr Mahathir to remain as the party president and Prime Minister.

It was a show of open support on Tengku Razaleigh’s part when he knew that some quarters within Umno are promoting the idea that the time has come for Dr Mahathir to step down.

An Umno member from Johor who came all the way to attend the function said:

“Umno members should take a leaf from the Tengku Razaleigh-Dr Mahathir long-standing feud. At the end of the day, there will only be one winner. The loser may feel bad and detach himself from the party.

“But there comes a time when the loser

Many eyebrows have been raised over Dr Mahathir's readiness to open the Gua Musang division meeting.

In fact, as pointed out by Tengku Razaleigh, the last time Dr Mahathir opened the division's meeting was in 1982, almost two decades ago.

Then, the division was known as Ulu Kelantan and was re-named Gua Musang prior to the 1986 general election.

An Umno member from Kuala Pilah pointed out that the event was reminiscent of the party's old practice when divisional meetings were deemed as one of the highlights for any district in the country.

Another Gua Musang Umno member said:

"In the past, a division meeting would be preceded by a *kenduri* and *permainan rakyat* (traditional games) in which Umno members who failed to become delegates, and people from all walks of life, participated.

"Almost everyone from the district would take the opportunity to take part and with that, Umno became the rallying point for unity for the community."

Earlier in the day, the organisers held a jogathon and then gathered a large number of motorcyclists to join a parade.

By the time Dr Mahathir arrived and was delivering his speech, the mood had already been set and the audience, including those who were not Umno members, were listening intently to what the Umno president had to say.

This political engineering is what was missing in some Umno divisions which had become too "cut and dry".

To some members, divisional elections are about ensuring that their candidates

mer Finance Minister an ally.

The fact that Dr Mahathir had chosen to cancel other programmes to open the Gua Musang division meeting was enough to raise numerous theories.

Against this backdrop, quite a number of those insecure in the present Umno set-up felt uncomfortable.

It is especially so with those who felt that they had fallen out of favour with Dr Mahathir or those who might have some "guilt" on their conscience over certain deeds they had committed which did not reflect loyalty to the party president or the Government.

But all these are hang ups which have always prevailed among politicians, not only those from Umno but other political entities, too.

This aside, the whole event on Saturday actually reflected a very traditional Umno practice.

For one, Tengku Razaleigh for almost a decade, was the worst critic of Dr Mahathir following their fallout after the intense 1987 party elections when he failed to unseat Dr Mahathir as the Umno president in a close fight.

Tengku Razaleigh then set up Semangat 46 and styled himself as the leader of the opposition front he master-minded — the Malay-dominated Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah and the multi-racial Gagasan Rakyat.

The 1990 general election was actually the second round of battle between Tengku Razaleigh and Dr Mahathir after the 1987 fight, with Dr Mahathir again proving himself to be the master of the game.

In 1996, Tengku Razaleigh disbanded Semangat and all the party members in-

must be able to accept the winner, support him and offer his services to work together to improve the party."

A pertinent observation from the elderly Umno man, especially when almost all Umno divisions throughout the country are having contests not for top posts, at least down the ranks.

Then, when Dr Mahathir made his speech, it turned out not to be something excessively inspiring.

It was full of his criticisms of Pas, outlining the party's abuse of Islam, its betrayal of the struggle for the religion and manipulation of the religion for its political end.

While Dr Mahathir's speech may not help journalists covering the event in finding its news value, for party members, they were strong points they could use to counter Pas' attack on Umno.

This is something which close aide to Tengku Razaleigh, Ahmad Shabery Chik, had always been promoting.

"Umno members vying for divisional posts should not try to undermine their opponents. They should prove to the delegates that they are better in representing the party in facing the onslaught of Pas."

These signals were being sent down by Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh for party members to pick up.

But it won't be surprising if they choose not to be alert to the underlying message sent and instead, be more interested in the intrigues purportedly shrouding the visit of Dr Mahathir to Gua Musang.

Just when their leaders take them to the right, they still choose to go left. Then they will be the first to complain of being lost.

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