

Umno needs loyalty

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Curbing money politics will help restore faith and confidence in party

By V. Gayathry

Every year, reporters covering the Umno general assembly waited anxiously for the closing speech by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. It was no different this year and all eyes were on Mahathir at the press room at Level 3 of PWTC.

Reporters, both from the local and foreign media, converged to hear him speak, because, despite the plethora of criticisms and views at the three-day general assembly, everyone knew Mahathir has the last word.

The prime minister did not mince his words when he reminded the delegates that the survival and relevance of the party rest on their loyalty to the president.

While devoting much of his speech to whipping up sentiments against the Opposition, Mahathir was also critical of Umno members who let their personal interests get in the way of the party's.

Recalling the dismal voter support for some Umno candidates in the 1999 general election, he lamented that his choice of candidates were challenged by people from within the party.

"Pilih calon ini tak kena, pilih yang lain pun tak kena." (I choose this candidate people say it is a bad choice, when I put up another candidate, these people are still unhappy) he said, attributing the failure of the party to the lack of support for his choice.

What then of the call to the Malays to change their mindset and to strengthen unity in his opening

address, when at the end of the day, the prerequisite is to obey the party president?

A former MP said this call reinforces the top-down approach in the party that will not go down well, especially among Umno's middle-level and thinking members.

"Umno is being threatened, not the individuals. We have to focus our strength on the party and that essentially means being loyal to the party.

"I'm not so sure that things will be alright just by asking members to be loyal to the president. The centre of the party has to shift from the leadership to the base," he said, noting that shouts of '*Hidup Melayu*' (Long Live the Malays) must be translated into action.

Unity is also attained when there is faith and confidence in the party, and the serious clampdown against those indulging in money politics by Umno's disciplinary board recently sent a clear signal that those with self-interests will not be tolerated.

One would have expected greater debate on the issue after Mahathir's repeated warnings in previous years, but the focus was minimal.

Queries by a few delegates on the definition of money politics and the

fine line between money politics and community service went unanswered.

The absence of avenues for appeal until now also raised concerns among some, of the need for checks and balances in the party, said an assembly observer.

That concern was put to rest when deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced that the supreme council will discuss the possibility of setting up an appeals board.

In a sense, the quality of debate was not very encouraging because of the limited topics that could be raised. There was a parameter within which only certain concerns could be debated like unity, education and agriculture.

In reality, Umno has been outpaced by globalisation and development, which are taking place at a blinding speed, and the problems they present have not been addressed.

Among the new concerns are the young Malays, inside and out of Umno, who are seen as PAS sympathisers and those of the reformasi movement, and the successful use of

Internet by the Opposition that many Umno leaders concede gnawed the credibility of the party.

Said supreme council member and cabinet minister Datuk Azmi Khalid: "Umno has not been able to come up with a strategy to deal with information spread through the Internet. That was our failure in the past general elections."

Puteri Umno pro tem head Azalina Othman Said rightly pointed out that the younger generation is the product of the education and social policies of Umno.

That makes it mandatory for the party to adapt to their needs and demands, and learn to accept that critical voices are not necessarily anti-Umno.

In the final analysis, the one thing that the delegates endorsed was that the party's formidable enemy - PAS, in its alliance with the other opposition parties, foreigners and dissenting groups - must be defeated in the next general election.

How that will be achieved remains unclear because the less than fiery assembly failed to clearly spell out the strategies, apart from its ambitious recruitment drive.