

PM to restore Umno's lost pride

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Mahathir tours country to fight resurgent Opposition and revive fortunes of party

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PETALING JAYA, Sun: Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has hit the road to face the people and boldly lock horns with the Opposition almost a year after he made the pledge to reduce ministerial work and concentrate on party matters.

The pledge, made at the 54th Umno general assembly last May, was to revive Umno's fortunes and narrow the widening gap between Umno and the Malay masses.

The last 60 days have been hectic for Mahathir in his quest to restore Umno's lost pride.

His first stop was in Kedah and it was an appropriate one, too.

Kedah is Mahathir's home state, an important Malay hinterland but also home to a newly energised PAS.

Mahathir met Umno grassroots supporters in Alor Star, Baling, Padang Terap, Pokok Sena, Sik and Kuala Nerang and dialogued with middle and state-level leaders in a packed two-day schedule last month.

He also answered questions directly posed to him from the people.

The message everywhere is to close ranks and work harder to restore the people's

trust in Umno.

It goes without saying that Baling, Padang Terap, Pokok Sena and Sik are PAS-held parliamentary constituencies, once held by Umno before the 1999 general election.

In Kuala Nerang, the dialogue was cancelled as it was learnt that Mahathir wanted a dialogue with the people. He did not want selected speakers to be allowed to ask questions.

"Mahathir wanted the dialogue to be frank and open and not controlled," said a Umno leader.

Mahathir's next visit was to Pahang in mid-March where he held a closed-door meeting with about 500 Umno members from the Lipis and Raub divisions, exhorting them to return to the basic values that had made Umno strong and indispensable for the Malays.

On his trip to Sabah late last month, apart from Kota Kinabalu and Keningau, Mahathir also visited Tenom, a rural town some 200km from Kota Kinabalu where he spoke before 20,000 people.

Most recently, Mahathir spent a day with Negri Sembilan Umno members, especially from the Jempol and Jelevu Umno divisions, at a meeting near Bahau on Saturday.

In another development, Mahathir spoke to more than 10,000 people closer to home

on Tuesday at a Listeners, Viewers and Readers Group (K3P) programme organised by the Information Ministry in Gombak.

Like the Semarak movement of the 1980s, K3P is designed to foster closer rapport between the people and the leaders.

The meet-the-people sessions has just started and will expand further in the months ahead.

The need for such rapprochement with the people, especially with Malays in the villages, has its origins in the Umno general assembly last year where delegates openly said the Umno leadership had lost touch with the rank-and-file party members.

Umno's performance in the last general election showed that the people's support for the party has eroded over a combination of factors but mainly because of a major split in Umno and among Malays following the expulsion of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The condition of the party deteriorated to the point that during last year's assembly, delegates had openly criticised the party and pointed out its weaknesses.

Responding to these needs, Mahathir had said: "Since there is too much work at the PM's Department, and it interrupts my attention to party matters, I will transfer more work at

the PM's level to the deputy prime minister (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) and the ministers.

"That way, I will have more time to focus on party matters, meet more party leaders, visit states and listen to their problems."

Another attempt to bring party members closer to their leaders is by holding supreme council meetings in various states twice a month instead of only once.

By doing so, it is hoped that the leaders will have more time to meet the people and announce party and government policies.

Complementing this effort, party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob announced Umno's programme labelled *Bertanya Khabar* early this year.

The programme gives party leaders at the middle and lower echelons the opportunity to get explanations on current issues from top leaders.

It will also see the party president visiting Umno divisions to meet the members.

Khalil warned that with the programme, there should not be any more inactive branches, and branch leaders should realise that attention is also given to them.

Observers said this way, leaders will also be able to know the efforts undertaken by the various party bureaus.

Through the visits, Umno

leaders will also be able to go on an onslaught against the Opposition.

During his Pendang visit, Mahathir had explained to the people that the Opposition was making baseless accusations by claiming that Umno is against the Chinese.

He said this is an attempt by the Opposition to win Chinese support in the next general election.

Mahathir was responding to a question on a statement on the Internet quoting PAS president Datuk Fadzil Noor's political secretary, Dr Hatta Ramli, as saying PAS would go all out to protect the Chinese if Umno oppressed them.

In Lipis, Mahathir said the Opposition is focusing on the poor and instigating them to protest against the government.

He said the Opposition has been focusing on squatter areas by visiting the sick and the injured in hospitals.

Mahathir is scheduled to visit other states, including Perak, Kelantan and Malacca.

Larut MP Raja Datuk Ahmad Zainuddin Raja Omar said Mahathir's move to meet the people directly should be taken as an example by other leaders as it would consolidate and strengthen the party.

Apart from gaining feedback directly from the people, the opportunity could

also be used by the leaders to explain current issues directly to the people.

"The prime minister's move will spur other leaders to do the same. This is what the people want," he said.

"Rural folk not only hope for facilities, but they will also be happier if they could be closer to their leaders ... the Malay culture is such."

While on his visits, the prime minister had never failed to advise the people on the importance of unity, especially in a multi-racial country like Malaysia.

In his unscheduled visit to the Old Klang Road area, where clashes left six people dead three weeks ago, Mahathir reminded the residents not to be influenced by rumours.

He said Malaysia is a unique country where various races have lived in peace and harmony since Independence.

Whatever these meet-the-people sessions are called, there is a clear need for leaders to go to the people and re-establish faith and convince them that the leaders are there to do good for the people and the nation.

It is easy to lose trust but hard to regain it.

Umno and Mahathir have together taken vital steps on this long and winding road.

The success or failure will be tested in the next general election in 2004.