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Dr M's winding-up address made up for uneventful assembly

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SYED is an observant fellow. Seated quietly at one corner outside the main hall of the Putra World Trade Centre, the young-looking chap was a picture of dejection.

In fact, several others I met at the PWTC where Umno had its 55th annual Assembly had walked around as if anticipating fire at some point or other.

That it did not materialise left these people wondering whether this was yet another facet of the Umno re-engineering now taking place. When I left Syed standing by one the pillars outside Dewan Merdeka, his creased forehead had a rather worried look.

Where were the questions, comments, views and criticism that some had expected to come from delegates at the Assembly? Syed, in particular, had expected delegates to seek clarification from party leaders on some issues confronting the party today.

Another observer was sure that he would hear voices demanding an explanation for the resignation of party treasurer and Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin; some remarks on the possible entry of Sabah Chinese who were members of the dissolved Akar into Umno; and at least some comment on several corporate deals that have taken place these past months.

Even the issue of Malay unity talks between Umno and Pas was not raised although references were made to the need for Malays to unite regardless of their political affinities and beliefs.

Indeed, the absence of these issues in the debates were so conspicuous that everyone was left wondering whether the delegates had forgotten about them.

Some delegates had their own explanations as to why these issues were not raised. One countered, "What's there to ask? These matters have all been answered before the Assembly by party leaders. Even Daim's resignation has been well covered in the media."

Yet another delegate had this to say, "Didn't you hear the opening speech by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad? Do you think we want to raise those issues when we have a far bigger battle ahead of us? The Malays have forgotten their humble beginnings. Many have become big-headed.

"I want to go back to my bahagian (division) and remind Malays there of their duties. Perjuangan kita belum selesai (our struggle is far from over)..."

Another observer asked a rather curious question. "Where are all the corporate figures? Usually, many of them would walk the floor using their pemerhati (observer) tags. There were one or two on the opening day, but after that there was none."

I didn't notice that at first. But upon closer inspection, and after asking around, the veteran observer was quite right. I can't say for sure whether this was an issue or not, but then the political people tend to read significance into every little thing. I won't be surprised if these people stayed away from the proceedings so as not to attract attention to themselves.

I had, at first, expected more from the Assembly. The absence of some sharp questions from the floor had evoked many questions in my head. In the past, delegates would not spare members of the Supreme Council with their probing questions.

If I had felt the Assembly to be a little wanting at first, then it was

given an uplifting feeling by Dr Mahathir's closing speech. His opening remarks had already pricked the conscience of many Malays, I'm sure. In fact, he had probably shamed everyone in the hall that they had second thoughts about raising any issues at all.