

22/06/2001

Dr M once again a step ahead with his challenge to Umno and Malays

Abdul Razak Ahmad

THE big debate began soon after Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad ended his opening speech at the party's 55th annual general assembly yesterday.

No, it was not the debate by delegates on the motions of the assembly, but the discourse among the Press corps and political pundits at the sidelines.

The topic centred on the president's speech which was not as fiery as in previous years, though Dr Mahathir is more noted for his radical and thought-provoking speeches.

There was the speech where he was overcome with emotions when talking about the rampant money politics in Umno.

And another, when he complained of how efforts to weed out corruption in the party was getting nowhere despite his tears, pleas and prayers.

Most recently during a gathering of senior party members, Dr Mahathir drew enthusiastic applause from the delegates when he announced that he had had enough of money politics in Umno, and promised that there will be no mercy for those found guilty.

Many predicted that Dr Mahathir would make similar dramatic statements this time around.

After all, the assembly comes in the midst of continuing action by the party's disciplinary board to investigate and punish corrupt members.

And surely Dr Mahathir would address the intense speculation surrounding the resignation of Umno treasurer and Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin?

He did neither. Instead, Dr Mahathir delivered a marathon speech lasting one hour and 57 minutes, in which he described the perils awaiting the Malays, their weaknesses and how to overcome them.

If the contents of his speech sounded familiar, it is because the party president had covered those topics previously.

Nevertheless, several supreme council members were singing praises of the president's speech.

"I think it's the most brilliant speech in the history of Umno," declared a supreme council member with an enthusiasm so excessive that it bordered on being sychopantic.

A little more sober was the assessment of party vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

"His speech is extraordinary in terms of his frankness and courage in detailing the problems afflicting the Malays," he said.

This was echoed by fellow vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

"A marathon speech, but very timely, bearing in mind the situation we are facing."

The situation mentioned by Muhyiddin are the dangers that await the Malays if they fail to adapt and overcome some of their core weaknesses.

Specifically, Dr Mahathir outlined how many Malays still possessed the wrong attitude when it came to acquiring knowledge.

Some, he explained, felt that educational opportunities were an inalienable right and took them for granted, while others had a dim view that all that was required of the Malays was to seek religious knowledge.

Dr Mahathir also did not mince his words when he attacked the laid-back attitude of the Malays when it came to developing themselves economically.

He said many were so preoccupied with getting rich quick that they did not have any qualms accepting bribes in the process.

Unless these weaknesses were addressed, the party president warned that the Malays might not survive for long.

With the party determined to cleanse itself of money politics, some felt that the president should have clarified the party's stand on the matter.

There appeared to be some confusion over several of the disciplinary board's recent rulings against members found guilty of money politics.

Citing an example, a delegate pointed out how the party leadership had continually stressed that members should respect the decisions made by the board and that those found guilty shouldn't appeal.

"However, some members found guilty by the board were only issued with warnings, so what should be their status in the party?"

"And what about those who were censured by the board but still continue to hold other positions? Why haven't they resigned?"

These issues need to be clarified by the leadership, and some were quite disappointed that Dr Mahathir did not raise these matters in his speech.

However, according to supreme council member and Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Wira Mohd Ali Rustam, Dr Mahathir no longer has to dwell too much on Umno's internal money politics problem.

"There is already so much fear among members because they know that if they do it they will be punished.

"In fact if you look at the current course of the disciplinary board's actions, even the more 'wily' culprits are getting caught.

"The disciplinary action should continue, but without the party talking too much about it as action speaks louder than words," he said.

The party, he added, was now shifting to a higher gear in its efforts to win back all the ground lost to the opposition during the 1999 general election.

After all, opposition parties are continually campaigning among the Malays, telling them not to support Umno as it is allegedly filled with corrupt members and leaders.

As such, the party's efforts to weed out corruption are meant to address the public's perception towards it as much as to cleanse the party.

By enlarging his focus on the Malays, Dr Mahathir is saying that Umno may be determined to weed out corruption, but the Malays must also realise their own weaknesses.

It is also an indication of the development in the party's campaign against money politics, which can be traced back from the 1993 party elections when vote-buying was most rampant.

From then, Umno's fight against money politics included repeated warnings which ultimately led to the amendment of the constitution last year to allow for the establishment of a disciplinary board to investigate complaints.

From a strategic viewpoint, it is now time for Umno to move on.

And while sceptics wonder whether the Malays would be willing to accept another earful from Dr Mahathir on their own deficiencies, several party leaders see it as a necessity, such as supreme council member Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad.

"The process of cleaning up Umno will continue so that it becomes a party the Malays will look up to.

"But at the same time, the Malays need reminding, so it isn't at all a case of shifting the blame," said Shahrir, whose vocal stand on party matters is well known.

"I have been very critical when it comes to listening to speeches by the Prime Minister, but I find that this is a good speech.

"It presents the Malay-Muslim world view while at the same time reminds the Malays that they shouldn't always blame other people for their own failures," he added.

Doubtless, many would have cheered when Umno's disciplinary board announced strict punishments for those found guilty of money politics.

But by widening his scope to include all Malays and how they should collectively address their weaknesses in order for the race to survive, Dr Mahathir has raised the stakes not only in Umno but also for the Malays.

By issuing this challenge, Dr Mahathir has again stayed one step ahead.

With the next general election due in 2004, Dr Mahathir continues to lead Umno towards that challenge and in higher gear.

(END)