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Dr Mahathir rises to the challenge

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THE vigour with which he delivered his marathon opening address at the Umno general assembly on Thursday should make it amply clear to the Mahathir watchers that he is back in full fighting spirit.

And the frankness with which he told the delegates of the malaise Umno and the Malays are facing, suggests that he is not looking for popularity.

Many had come with a faint hope of hearing Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad giving hints of his retirement and setting in motion the succession process.

Instead he gave them a blast of his thoughts on what is right and wrong with the party and the Malays.

A Kedah delegate, who prides himself with representing his division for the last 20 assemblies, said he was pretty sure what went through the minds of those seated on the stage when Dr Mahathir was given a standing ovation at the end of his two-hour address - forget about an immediate transfer of the baton.

He observed that it would not be a surprise if the Umno president and Prime Minister stays beyond 2004, provided his health holds. Yet others warned that despite his crystal clear analysis of the problems facing Umno and the Malays, there will be those who will reject it. These are people who are driven by their hatred for him than by the power of reason.

A newly-elected Kelantan divisional chief warned that Dr Mahathir cannot discount his strong message falling on deaf ears. But that, he said, is not the main concern. The real poser is, having spelt out the malaise, what is Dr Mahathir, as the head of the party and the Government, going to do.

He feels that both Umno and the Malays have been warned often enough of the dangers confronting them.

"If our education system is a failure, change it. If we have to make English a compulsory subject, go ahead and do it. We cannot do things just to please the Malays. What good are happy Malays if they cannot compete?" he said.