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Dr M's wake-up call to Umno members, Malays to rise to challenge

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ON the day a journalist asked Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "can your speech be considered the Malay Dilemma II", the Malays were awakened by another hard-hitting speech from the Umno president.

His address on the opening day of the 55th Umno general assembly last week obviously demonstrated that the Prime Minister was disturbed by the ingratitude and greed of the Malays.

"Yep!" replied the Prime Minister when asked if the concerns he had raised in his presidential address could be likened to a second Malay Dilemma, a book he wrote on the problems faced by the Malays in the early 70s.

It was the longest presidential address - one hour 57 minutes, according to Umno permanent chairman Tun Sulaiman Ninam Shah - ever delivered at an Umno general assembly.

Some interpreted Dr Mahathir's speech as "bringing the Malays back down to earth" but some perceived it as a sign of desperation.

But Dr Mahathir denied he was desperate over the situation affecting the Malays, stressing that "as a leader it is my duty to warn the people about what would happen if they do certain things".

The Malays, especially Umno leaders and members, will be doing the right thing if they take the Prime Minister's advice seriously.

Before the general assembly commenced its proceedings on Wednesday, observers expected the 2,027 delegates to raise issues, viewed by some as pertinent, such as the resignation of former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, Umno disciplinary board's controversial decisions and Malaysia Airlines.

Dr Mahathir's opening address, certainly, according to some observers, set the tone for the assembly.

It explains the absence of fiery speeches, to be more exact, speeches which were critical of the leadership, at this year's proceeding.

The president's message was "to look at the bigger picture", said a delegate.

When the message filtered down to the delegates, they were aware that the call was for them to end the internal bickering and that the real foes are themselves apart from their traditional political enemies.

To borrow Dr Mahathir's words, that bigger picture is: "Contrary to their belief, the Malays could vanish from the earth or become slaves like in the colonial days, if they were not prepared to work hard, not prepared to seek knowledge and wisdom in this age."

"The likelihood is more obvious now because the Malays are disunited, have rejected unity because many have become greedy as a race, even religion is no longer regarded as important as the power struggle by parties and by certain individuals.

"Chances are we will only remain a name in history. The Malays apparently have not learned much from their history. The Malays easily forgot their history."

He warned Malays that democracy, equal rights, meritocracy and human rights would be used to destroy their special rights.

As a result, the focus of the debate shifted on how to rectify weaknesses in the party and share responsibilities.

The debate on the president's address called for concerted efforts to minimise splits and close ranks.

That opportunity was taken judiciously by the delegates.

Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, the Wanita Umno chief, took the opportunity to clear the air over the so-called strained relations between Wanita Umno and the new movement in the party, Puteri Umno.

A day earlier, in the Wanita general assembly, Rafidah said: "From today onwards, let's not talk about this anymore ... that Wanita dislikes Puteri.

"We have been heavily criticised because many have the perception that we are against the formation of Puteri.

"We are fed up with the remarks. I need to clarify here that we have never rejected the establishment of Puteri Umno. So let's end this story here."

Puteri Umno pro-tem chief Azalina Othman Said, in her speech during the debate, pleaded: "Give us a chance to prove our abilities and in our own way.

"This generation is a generation which can think for themselves, and with the right guidance, they can face any upcoming issue.

"As much as we appreciate criticism hurled at Puteri, we should not be lambasted with baseless criticism. Give us the opportunities to move and develop according to our own mould."

The proceedings also saw a heated exchange of words between Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and Pasir Mas division chief Datuk Ibrahim Ali when the latter criticised the movement for allegedly failing to carry out its duties and responsibilities aggressively and effectively.

The delegates also turned their guns on Pas. Some labelled it as a Pas-bashing session but more importantly, the members acknowledged the serious threat from its traditional foe in the 2004 general election.

"Unless Umno members close ranks and behave, we may lose," this was the message delivered by Dr Mahathir and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The voting pattern in the last general assembly must have alarmed the Umno members and party members were warned by the leaders that if they do not mend their ways and wipe out money politics, they may lose their grip on the Government in 2004.

The assembly, described by Hishammuddin, served as an awakening experience for party members.

"The members realised this was not the time for personal attacks and criticism.

"Instead they have realised the only way Umno can be strong is for everyone to come together as an entity. Umno delegates and Umno as a whole have woken up and realised that the Malays must continue to work hard and rise high," said Rafidah.

The curtain on the assembly came down not without a bang.

Dr Mahathir called for Umno to remain the torch-bearer for the Malays and become masters of their own destiny.

But Dr Mahathir's remarks on the takeover issue of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press became the talking point. He warned them not to drag him into the controversy and spoke at great length to explain why they should not.

This time around, there was no need to bring Umno members far from where they are. The problem is at home. It will only be three assemblies before 2004.

Umno members and the Malays must now shape up or forever be damned. Take it or leave it.

The Malays have nowhere else to go but forward. But to survive in the modern world, they must be better than what they are now.