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Looking beyond the proliferation of stalls at the PWTC for solutions

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AN observer to the Umno general assembly quipped that Umno is now under attack from a new enemy.

"If Umno does not check this new enemy, the party may have to find a new place to hold its assembly next year."

He was referring to the increased number of temporary stalls set up on the ground floor of the Putra World Trade Centre.

Compared with previous assemblies, especially the one last year, the number of stalls has overflowed and even ventured close to the halls when before, they would have only taken up a section inside and outside the entrance.

Another observer said: "If only the increased number of stalls reflected the increased support for Umno, then the party should have no trouble facing the relentless attacks from the opposition."

Again, compared with the past couple of assemblies, there seems to be an air of festivity. At least that's what most of the delegates felt.

But some observers disputed it, saying that the event was as subdued if not more than the year before.

There would not be anyone, though, who could authoritatively state if the assembly this year is livelier or otherwise.

The question is why should such a trivial matter be so important that it is discussed by those attending the assembly?

For one, since the 1997 economic crisis followed by the internal crisis within the party after the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the party assemblies had been caught up with much uncertainty.

Then, the 1999 general election caused more concern among party members since the results showed Umno losing much ground among the Malay voters.

As such, the assemblies became a place for members to lament, to share their fear and uncertainty.

Obviously, with such thoughts crossing the minds of leaders and delegates alike, especially those who still cared for the party, exuberance and glee would not readily emerge.

In retrospect, the 1997 assembly was an occasion to extensively discuss the threat of the economic and financial crisis.

By the time the 1998 assembly was convened, the Anwar episode was already quite ready to derail members from being loyal to the party and be turned into hero worshippers.

The 1999 assembly was equally stressful for the delegates. It was held just before the general election and Umno was still having its hands full dealing with the financial crisis and the Anwar debacle.

Then, last year's assembly was equally painful as the general election results of the previous years proved that Umno had lost much ground among the Malay voters and the Anwar episode remained an issue.

As such, the assembly ended up being viewed as a platform used to exorcise the ghost of Anwar. Against this backdrop, this year's assembly should be a livelier one regardless of whether or not the number of stalls had increased.

After all, the economy, though not necessarily in the best of health, is not in the intensive care unit as it was in 1997 and 1998. Furthermore, Umno members can take pride that the economic recovery was the brainchild of their leaders who were able to chart their own plans without having to succumb to the International Monetary Fund.

They should also be able to then claim, that the ability to pave the way for a recovery without having to turn to the IMF had ensured that the special position of the Malays and the privileges that they enjoyed were not affected.

It is also an assembly which re-affirms Umno's commitment to the Malay agenda and not be distracted by the enemies which were attacking them from all fronts.

It is the time for them to get over lamenting, being caught in the shell of self-degradation, self-pity and groping in the dark. And for now too, it seems the ghost of Anwar has been laid to rest, although the fear that it may come back to haunt is still prevalent.

While all this sounds like good ingredients to prepare a potion for self-confidence, the need to look into the mirror to see Umno's true reflection of today cannot end.

Surely, Umno leaders and members realise, as they see their reflection, that it was they who offered to fight the Malay cause.

They were the ones who offered to be the champions of the Malays and it was they too who convinced the Malays to stick with them and "they will not go wrong".

Indeed, they can talk about track records since before independence but these can be archived to collect dust if the Malays of today do not find them serving that role anymore.

Actually, the disaffection of the Malays towards Umno of late has nothing to do with the party but rather the perception they have of the people within it.

As pointed out by former Umno MP for Parit Buntar Abdul Rahman Sulaiman:

"Umno is a good party, not only in its principles and struggles but that of what it had achieved.

"As Dr Mahathir raised repeatedly before, it is the members that make the party good or bad. If Umno was accepted as a good party before, it was because its members and leaders were accepted as good.

"If Umno today is perceived to be bad, then it is the members that had made it to be so. But Umno members have an easier task compared with those from other parties whose parties do not have a track record to shout about.

"All it takes for Umno members is to prove that they are good and committed to pursue the needs of the Malays. The rest will be taken care by the party's good image and track record of the past."

A very simple assessment which does not require much brains to decipher.

But to pursue it is another matter.

Yet, after undergoing almost four "subdued" assemblies, surely Umno members do not want to continue meeting up under such grim circumstances.

They have just about three more assemblies to hold before the next general election is called. That will be the test of whether they had been able to overcome their setbacks and return to the forefront of Malaysian politics.

Failing which, the party may just crumble and fade into oblivion.

Then too, it will not be the stalls that threaten their right to hold their meetings in PWTC but rather the circumstances of not being the party in power which cause it.

For now, they should go to one of the stalls selling mirrors. They can then see their own reflection and find if there are still warts that need to be removed.