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Party must fine-tune strategies to uplift economic status of Malays

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YOU know that the Umno general assembly is in its last day when stall owners at the bazaar announce massive discounts as part of their stock clearance sale.

For delegates, visitors and curious onlookers, the final day is the best to seek bargains at the bazaar, which is located on the ground floor of the Putra World Trade Centre, where the assembly is being held.

But despite the heavy discounts, the traders are still making a killing, especially with delegates eager to take home party memorabilia.

As such, it was ironic that despite the ebullient shopping carnival atmosphere, discussions on the state of the Malay economy inside the PWTC were still dominated by woeful tales of their status quo.

Not helping matters was how many of the corporate leaders, who have in the past benefited from strong Umno support, were noted to be conspicuously missing from the assembly.

A senior journalist related how a delegate queried him on the absence of these captains of industry.

Malay industry leaders have been a hot topic of speculation ever since the economic downturn of 1997.

Their doings have also been fodder for the Opposition's campaign to erode the Malays' confidence in Umno.

They allege that the special privileges accorded by the New Economic Policy have been unfairly monopolised by these few individuals due to their special relationship with Umno leaders.

Criticisms against Malay corporate leaders in Umno were also registered during the assembly debates.

Kedah Umno representative Datuk Badruddin Amiruldin said the party's corporate members "had done nothing" to defend the party.

Badruddin said it was the responsibility of such members to explain misconceptions relating to their involvement in the economy to the grass roots.

"We end up having to explain religious and economic issues to the grass roots, although we sometimes don't understand these matters," he said.

It was interesting to note how Badruddin also complained that members who are not Islamic experts have been "abandoned" with the task of explaining religious issues to the grass roots.

This is in view of how this year's assembly has shifted its emphasis to the offensive from last year's introspective self-criticism.

Almost every State representative who took to the podium narrated angry stories of how Pas was manipulating religion to gain support.

No doubt that to a certain extent, the speakers picked up the theme outlined by the party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his opening speech.

Specifically, Dr Mahathir, in his winding-up speech said that Pas, in their quest to obtain political support, was willing to sacrifice Malay interests.

This can be seen in all the promises made to the Chinese to gain support.

From the debates, it was clear that there was still room for Umno to fine-tune its strategies to ensure that its members are confident not only in supporting the party's efforts to uplift the economic status of the Malays, but also when confronting the religious misrepresentations of Pas.

But as Dr Mahathir explained, the Malays must realise that the main reason for their disunity and their inability to achieve the required level of economic development was because they easily forget the lessons contained in the painful history of their race.

Perhaps from such a perspective, despite all the party souvenirs on offer at the PWTC bazaar, a more valuable memento that party members can take home is the advice given by Umno's first president Datuk Onn Jaafar, who helmed the party from 1946-1951.

Immortalised on a plaque at the Umno gallery located at a quiet corner of the lobby of the adjoining tower named after him, Onn's message has been proven to be of significance throughout the five decades since his presidency: "The Malays will only be safe when they are strong, and they will only be strong when they are united."