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Umno all set for annual assembly

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THE Putra World Trade Centre as in past Umno past assemblies is richly decorated in the familiar red and white of the party. Everything at the party's headquarters seems to be smooth running from the minutest of detail right down to preparing the mammoth Dewan Merdeka where the three-day party annual assembly will be held.

In terms of logistics it would be nightmarish for an inexperienced organiser, but 55 years of existence has provided the party with the necessary organisational skills. In all, 2,027 delegates from all over the country, which include division leaders and representatives from the Umno Youth and Wanita Umno, will attend.

Observers from Umno Club overseas and 40 from foreign parties and countries will also be present, in addition to 50 observers from the newly-formed Puteri Umno.

But while the event had at times took in some sense of merriment and carnival-like atmosphere, the annual meeting nevertheless continues to be an avenue for party members and leaders to thrash out and debate issues of importance to the Malays in general, and the party in particular.

Expectations run high on the kind of issues that will be debated by the delegates but being a non-party election year the mood would be slight subdued.

Nevertheless party delegates and party members who camp outside the assembly hall will await eagerly the party president's speech tomorrow.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is likely to touch once again the issue of money politics and may explain in some details the recent action taken against several division leaders and members holding various other posts by Umno disciplinary board.

"There has been criticisms that the different levels of disciplinary actions taken against various members may be misconstrued by party members as being biased.

"The president will probably dwell on this subject at length," a party official said.

The state of the country's economy will probably be another top agenda in Dr Mahathir's hour-plus speech.

Looking at the global economy especially that of the US and its effects on the country Dr Mahathir, who is also Prime Minister, will outline the measures taken by the Government to combat the negative effects of the economic slowdown.

"He may even announce some form of assistance to the rubber and oil palm smallholders who are badly affected by the drop in the commodity prices," the Umno official said.

Speculations is rife on the eve of the Umno assembly that the issue concerning the resignation of Tun Daim Zainuddin as Finance Minister and party treasurer will dominate the debates.

"The issue will be touched in the relevant debates but it won't steal the limelight of the real issue at hand which is the survival of the party," party veteran Datuk Wan Mohd Mahyiddin Wan Nawang said.

Wan Mohd Mahyiddin who was formerly Umno's head of research unit and has recently retired after serving the party for over 34 years, said what is more important in the minds of the delegates is how to revive Umno after it getting battered in the 1999 general election.

"The Opposition says Umno has already reached the age of retirement or

"pencen" but we are here to prove them wrong.

"In fact Umno has managed to get her act together again and support for the party has been increasing from the number of new applications to join the party," he said.

The issue of being relevant to the present time has been the foundation of attack against Umno in the last general election and also party members were left in confusion following the sacking of former deputy president and deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, both from the party and Government.

These factors somehow succeeded in creating a confidence crisis in voters towards the party, resulting in the loss of several parliamentary and state seats.

"The members want change at all levels of the party. They want the ills of money politics to be wiped clean from plaguing the health of Umno.

"After our dismal performance in the last general election Umno has taken various measures to improve itself from within.

"It has realigned itself to being a responsible party not only to the members but also the country," Wan Mohd Mahyiddin stressed.

Today 689 Umno Youth and 694 Wanita Umno delegates will have their respective meetings prior to the official opening of the general assembly tomorrow.

Deputy party president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will address a joint session of both Youth and Wanita assemblies before each movement adjourns to their respective venues to continue the business of the day.

Umno has been accused by its critics and foes as being unattractive to the younger generation and it responded by setting up Puteri Umno to create awareness of the party among the young women.

The budding movement is said to be making good progress in signing up especially young women professionals into the party's fold.

However party diehards express reservations that the younger generation lack the commitment and determination to struggle for the party's cause.

"There are many people who join the party without any real understanding of its objectives and what it stands for.

"Umno is a party that fights for the Malay cause and for the country at the same time but some members have turn it into an avenue to enrich themselves.

"With the various training programmes prepared by the Information Unit the younger generation in the party will be made aware of their responsibilities and party idealism," Wan Mohd Mahyiddin said.

He added that Dr Mahathir himself has on many occasions personally explained various current issues to party members and this has tremendously helped in awareness and confidence among members.

Although Umno Youth has been touted to have elected itself an elitist image the "Pemuda Turun Ke Padang" programme has earned it much praise among party members and the public.

"It a positive sign shown by Umno Youth that they care for the people and take the effort to know their plight.

"Umno Youth must strive harder to counter the various issues played up by the Opposition to sway the youngsters and students," a party official said.

More and more Youth leaders are being given responsibility both in party and Government.

"In the Supreme Council, for example, there is a number of young faces and this is a positive development that Umno to accommodate the younger leaders in its echeleon.

"In the Government there are more young party leaders appointed to hold various positions and this is a good training ground for them in the

future," Wan Mohd Mahyiddin said.

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