

Sense of renewal within Umno

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Umno is gathering with a sense of renewal even as it is juggling with hot issues such as education and religion. In this curtain raiser on the day when Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi opens the Youth, Wanita and Puteri meeting,

JOCELINE TAN looks at what is in store for this year's Umno general assembly.

TAN Sri Khalil Yaakob was his customary self at last Friday's press briefing on the Umno general assembly.

He was cool and collected, and smiled in a resigned sort of way when the inevitable question popped up: what will the president's speech touch on?

"Tunggulah," he said, quoting his party president who had been similarly queried on his return from overseas earlier the same morning.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had told reporters at the airport: "Just be patient and wait for my speech."

The content of the presidential address usually remains pretty airtight for the simple reason that Dr Mahathir writes it entirely by himself and that, more or less, limits the leakage. Many suspected that by the time he stepped off his plane, the speech had been completed, or perhaps even already e-mailed to Putrajaya to be prepared in the usual booklet form.

The president's speech usually sets the tone for the assembly although some Umno politicians swear that the president's pre-council briefing - always closed-door and held a day before the assembly is sometimes more significant.

But there is no shortage of issues this year.

Education is clearly the hot potato this year - the ascendancy of English, bumiputra quotas in private colleges, using English for mathematics and science, meritocracy, religious schools.

Likewise, simmering topics for debate are likely to include the PAS-designed hudud enactment in Terengganu, the perennially hot issue of the Islamic state and, as the Prime Minister has hinted, the state of Malay society.

Education has traditionally been an issue that brings out the best and the worst in Umno politicians.

Like religion and language, education has come to be associated with Malay identity. It brought the Malays out of a rural, agrarian society, trans-

forming them into a diverse group of people found in virtually every sector of today's modern economy.

Hence, it seems only natural that Umno should so jealously guard what they are accustomed to even as its leaders are talking about meritocracy, competing in the global economy or about walking without crutches.

Johor Umno's Adam Hamid has come under fire for his Senai division's attempt to bring a no-confidence motion against the Education Minister. But many delegates also admit in private that Adam's ire reflects what ordinary Malays feel about the proposed changes to the education system.

"These are very real issues among Malays on the ground among parents and even teachers," said a Selangor politician.

In that sense, Adam might be articulating what many Umno people feel but do not dare voice out just because they feel it may not go down well with the leadership.

Malay society is still in transition and the seeming contradictions in the current debate on Malay educational quotas on the one hand and meritocracy on the other is very much part of that constant tug-of-emotional-war between the old and the new.

There is also another way of looking at Umno's current focus on issues close to the heart of the community.

"It shows Umno is strong now, hence it is tackling all these Malay issues," said a Malay business figure.

There's no denying it - Umno is on the road to recovery although not full recovery.

The two general assemblies following the 1999 general election were introspective, full of rancour and soul-searching of where Umno had gone wrong. Last year, Dr Mahathir spoke movingly about how easily the Malays had forgotten what the Umno-led government had achieved on their behalf.

This year, the mood is more upbeat, confident and out-

ward-looking. The formalisation of Puteri Umno is perhaps the most evident sign of that change.

"There is a sense of renewal and the younger members especially want to play a real role to change the Malay mindset," said Umno Youth exco member Norza Mohamed.

And as Umno Youth leader Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein has often said, there is also a sense that history has proven Dr Mahathir right on numerous counts.

Many in Umno, from ministers to grassroots leaders, feel they have managed to put the complications of the past two years behind them.

"People are coming back. Everywhere we go now, people are willing to listen and discuss, and our programmes attract more and more people," said Kelantan Umno chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamed.

And underlying this new mood is the expectation that the Prime Minister will go for an early general election.

The Barisan Nasional has won a number of key by-elections in the last one year. In all these victories, Umno's share of the Malay votes has gone up.

"The general scenario has helped us. We have to work hard from here," said Umno Youth secretary Zukifli Alwi.

Many in Umno feel the real barometer of Umno's recovery lies in nothing less than the test of another general election.

Hence, although the Wanita and Youth meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday will see current issues being aired, the meetings will also be the preamble for activating their party machinery for the polls.

"We'll be in election mode after the assembly," said Wanita Umno secretary Datuk Faridah Abu Hassan.

This week's gathering of the country's most prominent political party will be closely watched because Umno assemblies not only provide political and policy signposts for its Malay members, but for the rest of the nation too