

Master planner Dr Mahathir is standing tall

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News Analysis by
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THE theme for this year's Umno general assembly is *Umno: Perjuangan Sebuah Bangsa* (Umno: The Struggle of a Race).

But the casual visitor to the Putra World Trade Centre will not be blamed if he or she thinks that the theme is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

On the landing of the fourth level where the delegates gather in the grand Dewan Merdeka are enlarged photographs, almost the size of advertising boards, depicting the multiple roles played by the Umno president and Prime Minister - statesman, internationalist, visionary and even poet.

There's no doubt about it - Dr Mahathir is on the upswing.

"The last year has been a crowning achievement for him," said Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim.

Last week, he flew home from a hectic European trip and went straight to his Putrajaya office. That afternoon, he gave one of his frankest interviews ever to *Mingguan Malaysia*. It was a fascinating account of his hopes and plans for the Malays, as well as his disappointment and frustration with them.

This June 28 will be his 21st year as president of Umno and he feels, in more ways than one, that the successes and failures of the Malays have also been that of his own.

No other Umno president has endeavoured to change and mould the Malays the way he has and, at age 76, he remains the only Umno president who has dared lecture the Malays, nag them and even tell them off in no uncertain terms. At the same time, he has also been one of Umno's most spectacular figures, inspiring them with his intellect, ideas, work ethics and dreams of national achievement.

When Dr Mahathir stands before the 2,000-odd delegates today, he would have come full circle from Umno's lowest point four years ago. The country was then reeling from the Asian currency crisis and, shortly after, rocked by the sacking and trial of former Umno No. 2, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Dr Mahathir, said Umno Youth politician Mohamad Norza Zakaria, is at his strongest today.

"He has brought Umno back on track and he has been proven right on so many things ... the economy, his stand on moderate Islam," said Norza.

In conversations with Umno politicians in the run-up to this assembly, the constant refrain is that Dr Mahathir has single-handedly steered the country and the party back on keel.

What they mean is that Dr Mahathir's determination and tenacity that Umno has to recover was quite unmatched. They remember the way he went round the country meeting members, the endless dialogues he had with civil servants, grassroots leaders and interest groups.

His detractors find him recalcitrant but his supporters say he was never afraid to go against the popular grain if he thought he was doing the rightful. He is probably well aware of his regained political strength given the way he has renewed his quest in challenging the Malays to change, compete, strive for excellence, discard some of their crutches.

As he has said a number of times, "I have tried to show by example, I've scolded, cried, prayed ... I have tried everything."

It is hard to imagine that just a few years ago, there had been calls from the opposition ranks and even from within his own party that it was time for him to go.

Not anymore. He is today in a unique situation. The party is unanimous in the stand that he and he alone should decide

when he wishes to call it a day.

Dr Mahathir will be remembered for many things but it is possible that he may wish most to leave behind a foundation of a Malay community that is modern and progressive yet culturally intact, educated and worldly yet hinged to their religious beliefs, independent and confident yet remindful of the forces that had propelled them forward.

"He wants to see a Malay community that is prepared to face the future. That's why he's almost bullying them to let go of the crutches, to take off the blinkers and to look ahead," said a Kelantan Umno politician.

For instance, his conviction regarding the need for Malays to master the English language is grounded in his experiences over the years. He has seen how the standard of English has deteriorated among Malay civil servants, even diplomats.

He told a closed-door meeting he did not want to see a future generation of Malaysians having to speak to foreigners through interpreters.

If Dr Mahathir sounds somewhat impatient in his efforts to change the Malays, it is possible that he is conscious of his own mortality.

There will only be one more Umno assembly before the next general election and that election is likely to be Dr Mahathir's last despite what some may say about the Prime Minister wanting to stay in power for life.

There is not much time to do what he wants to do for the Malays.

As a senior journalist who covers him pointed out: "I doubt if we will have another PM who dares push the Malays to change in the way that Dr Mahathir has done. That's why he knows he has to be the one to do it."

And Dr Mahathir being Dr Mahathir, he will want to make the years he still commands in Umno some of his best years.