

# Speech shows the battle is far from over

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a proud man who rarely admits defeat.

The Prime Minister and Umno president is a fighter and those who have followed his political career know he rarely gives way on issues especially when he knows that he is doing the right thing.

But today, at the opening of the Umno general assembly, Dr Mahathir apologised a total of four times, twice profusely. Scores of people in the audience were startled.

"This is not the Dr Mahathir we are used to," said an Umno delegate from Pahang.

The first apology came midway through his speech with

"I must beg the pardon of the Malays."

Then minutes later, he said: "So, please pardon me once again."

On the third occasion, he said: "I beg your forgiveness for the harsh words that I am using in this speech."

And finally, he said: "I beg your pardon because I have failed."

The president is well known for his lecturing tone at Umno general assemblies. And over the years, the Umno faithful have grown used to it and some say they have come to expect it. What they are less used to is the president's admission of failure and defeat.

"It is a form of shock treatment to jolt the Malays out of their complacency," said Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob.

Dr Mahathir's two-hour-long speech was notable for his blunt and grim view of Malay ways and attitudes.

He was clearly disappointed with the manner they had grown used to privileges and subsidies to the extent that they no longer felt they had to work hard or compete with others.

He lamented their lack of discipline, diligence and patience. He even called them "lazy," describing them as people who "like to find the easy way and the quick way, no matter what the end result it."

To compound the situation, many Malays have come to take the opportunities given them for granted or the

Government who made it possible.

At one stage, he even asked them to learn from the Chinese, a suggestion still considered so sensitive that few Malay leaders dare go on the record with it.

But then, this is Dr Mahathir. He has never been known to be a populist and from the tone of his speech, he seems at the end of his tether with the Malay reluctance to make that transition out of dependency.

"It takes a lot of courage to say you have failed. What he said has to be taken seriously," said special observer to the assembly Mohamed Zakhir Mohamed.

Umno politicians love to use grand terms such as "paradigm shift", "striving for excellence", "meritocracy" and "globalisation" but it was clear from Dr Mahathir's sense of frustration yesterday that these phrases had not gone beyond lip service.

The trouble with many Umno politicians is that they come every year with great anticipation, listen raptly to his speech, heap praises on it and then, they go back to their kampungs and back to their old ways.

"But this year, we must really go back and put what the president has said into practice," said Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam.

The Prime Minister has always fought an uphill battle with the Malay mindset, right from the days when he penned the rancorous

*Malay Dilemma.*

And the battle, it seems, is not over.

Some thought his speech signalled that he might be ready to call it a day. But most say their president is not the sort to leave while there is a still battle to be fought and the battle is not only the Malay mindset but also PAS.

He did not dwell on the issue of education that had caused ripples in the Malay community. But that does not mean the issue was not uppermost in his mind. If he wants to see controversial changes in the education system, he must first prepare the Malays mentally for the change.

It is also possible that many Umno politicians are less concerned about the Malay mindset than in winning the next general election.

Many see the years ahead as Dr Mahathir's last big push - not only to nudge the Malays into a more competitive era but also to regain the political ground lost to PAS.

"We hope the PM will continue. He has to because I don't see any Malay leader who can do what has to be done," said Adnan.

Adnan is not alone in this, going by the accolades heaped on the Umno president since the debate on his presidential address began yesterday afternoon.

The president's efforts on behalf of the Malays may not have come up to his own high expectations but, at least, he can be comforted by the thought that his endeavours have not gone unappreciated.