

IT came as a shock to most Malaysians. Umno delegates attending the party's general assembly usually expect a strong message from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his winding-up speech. Speaking off the cuff, the Umno president often did away with the prepared text.

The Prime Minister is said to be at his best when he is candid. His winding-up speech, when he replied to points raised by the delegates during the debates, is regarded as the finale of the annual gathering. But yesterday, the delegates got more than they expected.

When he announced that he was quitting as Umno president and Barisan Nasional chairman, everyone was shocked. There was no prior indication of the announcement.

He had complained that he had pleaded, cried and persuaded the Malays to shake off their apathy. Two days before the general assembly, he gave a strongly-worded interview in *Mingguan Malaysia*, saying it was a shame the community had to rely on privileges.

On Thursday, he took a different tone. He apologised several times to his listeners, saying he had failed to achieve what he set out to do. If his listeners did not get the message then, they would have got it by now.

The number of Umno delegates, observers and visitors to the Umno general assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre must easily be the largest in years. The various decisions taken by the Cabinet relating to education had in many ways fanned the interest of Umno grassroots members.

Previously, Dr Mahathir had only lectured his listeners on the importance of staying competitive and the need to be proficient in English but this year, he had taken various bold steps, some of which had shaken the community.

They include allowing non-bumiputras to study at the Mara Junior Science Colleges and using English to teach Mathematics and Science in Year One and Form One next year.

There has been uneasiness and even unhappiness among some Umno members over these radical changes but the majority threw their support, without question, behind their party head.

Dr Mahathir is, without doubt, the man of the hour. Just three years ago, party members were quietly talking about his exit from politics. Today, they want him to be around as Prime Minister and Umno president as long as he wants. They talked openly of Dr Mahathir leading Barisan Nasional to its biggest general election win.

They talked excitedly of bashing PAS in the polls and whacking the Islamist party in Terengganu, the home base of PAS deputy president Datuk Abdul Hadi Awang, and possibly even wresting back the state.

And among Barisan coalition parties, struggling to resolve their internal conflicts, they believe that with Dr Mahathir at the helm would be enough to steer their candidates to victory.

Even DAP strongman Lim Kit Siang has realistically advised PAS and Parti Keadilan Nasional to focus on denying Barisan its two-thirds majority instead of talking about capturing certain states. The two parties have openly declared that they want to win Kedah, Selangor and even Pahang in the next elections despite losing in a series of by-elections last year.

DAP leaders have privately voiced their concern over Hadi's takeover of the leadership in

Shocking them into waking up

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PAS ahead of the polls (party president Datuk Fadzil Noor, seen as more moderate of the two, remains in hospital). Hadi has vowed to push through the tabling of the syariah laws at the Terengganu State Assembly despite opposition from several groups and political parties.

The DAP, on the other hand, is attempting to make capital out of Dr Mahathir's declaration that Malaysia is an Islamic country. But the reality is that the semantic arguments are not generating emotions among Chinese voters as the party had hoped.

The Chinese voters understand that secular laws still reign supreme in the court of law under Barisan Nasional and whether Malaysia is labelled an Islamic state or an Islamic country, the legal structures remain intact.

This is different from PAS, which is trying hard to push for syariah laws to be enforced. Laws that blatantly affect non-Muslims, such as gender segregation, have been imposed in Terengganu and Kelantan.

As delegates to the Umno general assembly headed home yesterday and today, it was clear in their minds that Dr Mahathir was in a hurry to complete as much as he could. In some instances, the Umno president had even apologised for failing to carry out certain tasks, in the hope that his listeners would take his messages more seriously.

For many delegates, the assembly could even be the last before the next general election and many wanted to be witnesses to history.

Together with his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi - whom Dr Mahathir has openly declared as his successor - many would be watching closely the movements and statements of the two leaders for clues as to when the general election would be called and for history to be made.

Dr Mahathir has a task ahead of him: he must remain as Umno president and Barisan chairman to complete his journey.

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