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In the pink, red and white

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UNTIL the incomparable drama of the president's resignation - short-lived as it may have been - Umno's 56th general assembly had been special because of the women.

There were one or two other matters of note, which this report hopes to address presently, but first we must shake from our bedazzled eyes the stupendous spectacle of pink, red and white in what seemed an awesome archetype of the female condition.

There are some gaspingly beautiful young Malay women among Puteri's claimed 30,000 members. Pretty in Pink, you think? One of them glided past in a stunningly diaphanous white kebaya labuh with her Puteri Pink restrained to her sarong and corset, making a breathtaking case for transparency in politics.

It was, all told, an in-your-face performance, drenched in bravura confidence, resolve and style; a living metaphor of the formative role women have played in the genesis of Malay nationalism and the fate and fortunes of Umno.

"They're good for us," murmured party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, as we watched another henna-haired honey's eloquent exposition over the TV monitors. "On things like globalisation, they know. Kaum Ibu never went overseas."

Of course, in order to sample the true feelings of Umno men on the newly formalised young women's wing, it was advisable to ensure no woman of any description was within earshot. Not before a quick confirming glance all around did one divisional delegate admit his misgivings: "From nowhere to a vice-presidency in one year," he grumbled, "is maybe too fast."

He was referring to the new seat in the party's second echelon granted as a matter of course to the leader of Puteri Umno, now that the group is a full-fledged wing of Umno.

Unduly rapid upward mobility has come to be viewed askance in Umno, as nowadays there seem to be only two ways for it to happen: either winched up from above by the top leadership, or thrust up from below by the grassroots.

Umno Youth leader Hishammuddin Hussein, for one, is still perceived as a protected entity, as yet unproven (which is to say, alas, unbloodied) in outright contest. His counterpart in Puteri Umno, Azalina Othman Said, however, by now so battleworn as to seem almost physically incapable of smiling, may be wondering if having successfully established Puteri will prove worth her strenuous efforts not just in having run the gauntlet between Puteri and the party's venerable "Kaum Ibu" - Wanita Umno - but in having had to do so while fending off the outrageous slings and arrows aimed at her personality and personal life.

Still, she's done it. Puteri is a force to be reckoned with both within the party and in the open arena of Malaysian political activism, and Azalina deserves more genuine applause than she's received. As with Hishammuddin's leadership of Umno Youth, however, there's no denying the ambition that resides behind Puteri's perfect make-up and expensive (and as often as not, uncovered) hair.

This having been a non-electoral assembly, observers were spared any more incisive appraisals of party leaders or their presumptive successors. Ambition continues to percolate within Umno's body politic, but listening to the speeches from the assembly floor, it would seem to be manifested

only in support for the party leadership. Speakers attempted to outdo each other in finding synonyms for the sentiments of their president.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad excoriated the Malays for complacency; they dutifully agreed. He slammed them for laziness, incompetence and greed; they nodded gravely. He said he was only scolding them for their own good; they applauded.

"But only my hands are applauding," muttered one delegate. "Not all Malays are as he describes."

Agreed another: "There are many Malays who succeed. Maybe they're not around him."

To be fair, the party president acknowledged this himself at a Press conference on Friday. "Many Malays can compete," Dr Mahathir said. "It's not that there's no success. But it's not enough."

Seasoned Mahathir-watchers would have detected an old ploy on the part of the wily leader: he spins promises as threats, and vice-versa. For instance, the removal of preferential policies for the Malays was articulated as a threat and warning, when in fact it stemmed from the promise of a fully competitive community. "When the Malays can build skyscrapers and compete on par with everyone else," he asked a Press conference on Friday evening, "why should they be protected any more?"

What he's attacking is not Bumiputera rights and privileges per se, but their having become intrinsic to Malay identity in this country at the cost of the community's abilities and pride.

And so, what dissent there was prowled furtively about the crowded corridors of the Putra World Trade Centre, quietly distributing unsigned leaflets criticising this or that party figure. The hapless rebel journalist Ahmad Lutfi Othman and four of his colleagues were collared for passing out flyers itemising the alleged misdeeds of Selangor Menteri Besar Mohd Khir Toyo.

The contents of another such document, taking up alleged cudgels against party vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak, reportedly reached the man himself but probably no further, much to the chagrin of the anonymous authors.

And hardly anything was heard of the Senai Division's Adam Abdul Hamid, whose failed no-confidence motion against Education Minister Musa Mohamad had provided the only drama in the run-up to this assembly. But it was short-lived and ultimately counter-productive. "His action," said Datuk Shahrir Samad, "killed all discussion on this issue."

More correctly: there will no longer be any discussion on whether or not English will be re-introduced to school curricula or non-Malay students admitted into Mara Junior Colleges. However, no one's expecting a similar silence on how.

"There's no doubt we back the president's ideas on meritocracy and English," said Datuk Kamarulbahrain Zainuddin of Taiping. "We used to have English, and then we dropped it. That led to long-term disadvantages. We should have it back. But maybe there are better ways to do it."

When Malay became the sole medium of instruction in Malaysian schools a generation ago, a host of teachers had to leave the profession because, as is recalled, "they simply didn't have the tongue for it." A similar prospect now dangles alarmingly before today's teachers, stoking opposition to the plan. "Don't forget," warned one Malay educationist, "the teachers have historically been at the forefront of Malay nationalism."

Rebutted another delegate: "But that was when they were the only educated Malays. It's right to be concerned about our children's education, but kids can adapt. We did. They will. Their teachers are the problem."

On these and other matters of Malay rights and privileges, Dr Mahathir's admonitions fell on furrowed brows. The Umno general assembly, pitched as an annual celebration of Malay strength and pride, has become instead a yearly itemisation of the community's failings. Dr Mahathir, famously, makes no apologies for his sentiments (although this time he did apologise for the tone in which he articulated them).

But what emerged this year was a certain double dysjunction: between the misgivings of the party's president and the self-esteem of its rank-and-file, and between Umno and the rest of the nation's Malays. To hear Dr Mahathir address his flock, it would seem almost as though Umno had become the principal repository for Malay malingerers, opportunists and under-achievers.

Shahrir Samad decried what he called Umno's "ke-kita-an", the navel-gazing self-referentialism, the "us-ness", that threatens to make of Umno a closed shop, arrogating to itself the entirety of what it means to be a Malaysian Malay these days.

"What are the answers to his questions?" asked the Johor stalwart. "Are we prepared to return excellence in all fields? There is the problem of the Malay being a political animal, while the non-Malays are economic. There is a need to expand the Islamic world-view of the Malays."

Indeed, overblown religiosity was another feature of the assembly noticeable by its absence. Skullcaps, attempted beards and Palestinian scarves were now scarcely evident, while songkoks were back in black-velvet force, some of them truly towering.

Delegates no longer wore their religion literally on their sleeves. Pas, traditionally a shadow-presence of Islamist sentiment at Umno's assemblies, did not make it this year.

Or, if it did, it was keeping well out of the way of the ladies. For Wanita and Puteri in particular, this year's assembly marked a triumphant stepping-out of the Real Malay Woman, henceforth to be ignored at everyone's dire peril.

We observed the overt rapport between Wanita chief Datuk Paduka Rafidah Aziz and her deputy Datuk Shahrizat Jalil, and noted Rafidah's scathing dismissal as "rubbish" suggestions of any continuing disaffection between the mothers of Wanita and their daughters of Puteri.

On those deep issues of Malay morality, the erosion of which undermines the entire bastion of Malay pride and dignity with the deterioration of the family and the rise of incest, promiscuity, the fecklessness of Malay youth and the corruption of their men, Umno's women are ready to rock. Woe betide their menfolk if they do not rise to the challenge.

If Umno's 56th annual assembly was a curtain-raiser for the next general election (and it surely was), Pas should take serious notice of what they'd be up against in any purportedly "Islamic" initiative that would have the effect of diminishing women's status or curtailing their roles in politics, business and society in this country.

Against the women of Umno, they wouldn't stand a snowflake's chance in hell.

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