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Malays will have to make a choice

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IT was on a yacht off Naples, Italy, with the sea breeze blowing, that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad found inspiration for the speech he delivered at the opening of Umno's 56th annual general assembly yesterday.

He was in Italy earlier this month for a meeting with Pope John Paul II before beginning his week-long visit to Switzerland and Luxembourg.

It was rumoured that he made the finishing touches to his speech at the end of his European visit.

Whether or not the Italian spring air had anything to do with what the Umno president wanted to say is immaterial, however, because what he said is something that should make the Malays feel quite ashamed of what they have become.

In a nutshell, Dr Mahathir said the Malays have now become weak and are far from being safe and secure from any open challenge or threat. And if and when that happens, they will not have the capability to defend their rights and status.

All this said at a time when Malaysia, as a nation, had made tremendous strides politically and economically. Perhaps that was precisely Dr Mahathir's point: at this stage in the country's development, the Malays should not stop working hard because the race to win is not over.

Perhaps this is his way of pushing the Malays to attain that admirable level of success so that they are strong against any threat within and outside the country.

Dr Mahathir's speech was titled "Exposing the Exposed", and it was said that he wrote the speech in Bahasa Malaysia and translated it himself into English to keep it true to the Malay text.

Indeed, Dr Mahathir's exposure of the weaknesses and the malaise of the Malays should surprise no one.

By comparison, his delivery was not fiery. The Umno president has made far stronger speeches in past assemblies during more challenging times both for the Malays, the party and the country.

But globalisation is taking place, post-Sept 11 has treated Muslims poorly, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues unresolved.

In the country, the Malays are divided by politics and religion. Religion is being used to perpetuate narrow politics. All this seems to threaten the survival of the Malays.

They cannot afford to be complacent or satisfied with whatever little they have achieved.

If lulled by success, they will be reduced to what they once were - an inferior and colonised race incapable of competing with others.

Dr Mahathir could be accused of paranoia, but that would be far from the truth. The reality is that the Malays have serious problems that must be dealt with.

The time for self-assessment and self-analysis is over. The Malays know what is afflicting them. Just look at the statistics of incest and rape cases.

Have the Malays, at a time when the country is riding the wave of economic success, lost it?

Dr Mahathir apologised for being harsh in exposing the Malays and doing so in front of others. But he said he was not exposing anything that they did not know.

It needed to be said, because the time may come when the Malays will

lose what they have fought for - by design or by choice. And when that time comes, they will no longer be able to depend on their political dominance, but on their own strength and discipline.

This can only be achieved through hard work and perseverance, because the Malays lack nothing. Many, in fact, have proven to be brilliant economists, engineers, scientists, doctors, mathematicians and businessmen.

The choice is before the Malays. But there can only be the right one.

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