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Debates: Short in form maybe, but not in substance

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WHEN delegates gathered for the opening of the Umno general assembly on Thursday, they were sure that the amanat presiden (president's message) would be something they could look forward to.

Even at the dullest of times, party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad never fails to lend some excitement with his provocative thoughts and ideas.

Then, of course, delegates would debate on the motion of thanks on his address and other resolutions. And oh, those debates!

Some Umno leaders are known to have emerged from obscurity in these debates to become well-known party names.

There were firebrands and many talented orators. There were resident comics too. Just take your pick.

But times have changed. What were described as lively debates would probably be given another description.

What would have tickled the delegates then would probably irritate them today.

Style aside, debates are when thoughts, views and ideas are articulated for the party leadership to take note.

Whether dull or stimulating, debates should be substantive. Rightly or wrongly, they do reflect the contemporary state of Umno.

When delegates wound up the debates on two resolutions yesterday - the motion of thanks on the president's address and on education - it seemed as though something was missing.

Frankly, it did not matter that there was no "oomph", no punches and no drama. Perhaps there was no need for all that.

Umno, to quote a Johor delegate, has really come of age and has reached a level of maturity and mellowness such that style and flair are inconsequential.

But in this day and age, everything should count - style and flair should be combined with substance and content.

Today's delegates are far more educated and more exposed. Many hold doctorates and are university graduates. So if you are only good on style, you can be sure they are not easily fooled by rhetoric.

Facts and figures were aplenty in their speeches, but they lacked novelty, new ideas and some real debate.

It is not that Umno general assemblies ought to be an arena for delegates to hog the limelight and show their stuff (although that is not such a bad idea).

What they are, and should be, are an avenue where ideas converge, criticisms are made and voices heard.

Of course, delegates need not slam the party president for accusing the Malays of being lazy and deeply complacent; that they would be helpless in face of threats.

Surely, a little real debate, a right dose of dissent would not be disruptive.

There was a time when the Putra World Trade Centre seemed to dwarf Umno assemblies. Delegates were often awed by its size and grandeur.

The PWTC has not become smaller but Umno assemblies have grown "bigger". There is now more participation, befitting a party that has grown and matured.

So, as a delegate remarked: "Excuse us for being dull and lifeless. We

may not have the form. But we would like to think that we have substance."
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