

19 JUN 2003

Umno-Round-Up

GENERAL ASSEMBLY SHOWCASES UMNO'S STRENGTH

KUALA LUMPUR, June 19 (Bernama) -- The first day sitting of the Umno General Assembly here today was starkly different compared to the past -- a showcase of the party's strength.

It showed a rejuvenated Umno after the 1999 general election which saw it losing Terengganu and several other areas to PAS.

This was reflected by a vast crowd of party members and supporters from all over the country, who turned out to watch the party proceedings at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC).

Some 30,000 people packed the Merdeka Hall, occupying every chairs and an inch of space available.

It shows the extend of the Umno's strength and influence on the Malays, said Umno Secretary-General Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob when tabling his report before the general assembly.

According to him, Umno now has over three million members in 19,034 branches nationwide and in 44 Umno Clubs overseas.

Many observers agreed that this year's turn-out was big, even bigger than in 1987 when Umno President Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was challenged by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah or in 1993 when Deputy President Tun Ghafar Baba gave way to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Besides being a showcase of strength, the presence of the vast crowd could also be because they wanted to see Dr Mahathir and hear his last words as the party's president.

Dr Mahathir had announced that he would step down as Umno President and Prime Minister in October after being in both positions for over 20 years.

As such, his message this time should be noted by all party members because it will be the last Umno general assembly before the party faces the general election, scheduled to be held at the latest next year.

Rightly so, Dr Mahathir's speech this time was punctuated with warning and advices to Umno members.

This included threats which Umno in particular and the country in general would have to face whether from outside or from within.

Dr Mahathir said Umno could lose in the general election not because the opposition was strong but because of the action of some leaders and party members who betrayed the struggle of the party.

On external threats, Dr Mahathir warned of various attempts by the Europeans to colonise the directly or indirectly.

"If not our country will be invaded, our ideas, our cultures, our religion and all others will be used as excuses," he said.

On internal threats, he said the misinterpretation of the Islamic teachings by PAS had caused Muslims in the country to be confused and divided when by right they should be united to save themselves.

Today's proceedings also saw the delegates debating the presidential address in high spirit.

All the delegates who took part in the debate, in particular those representing the states governed by or having strong influence of PAS, expressed the commitment to ensure Umno's victory in the next general election.

If any, the only shortcoming on the first day was the absence of the Umno permanent chairman Tun Sulaiman Ninam Shah who is indisposed. His duties were taken over by his deputy, Datuk Onn Ismail.

In the past, Sulaiman's handling of the meeting made it exciting to

watch especially when confronted with delegates who seemed unable to stop when taking part in the debate.

-- BERNAMA

AM KHY ROS ABG