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A fitting gift for Dr Mahathir

THE 54th Umno general assembly has turned into a tribute for party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, with an outpouring of accolades and gratitude from delegates on the foundation laid by him for unity and development.

While they are allowing him to leave the stage gracefully, those who spoke also took stock of the post-Mahathir era, especially the need for the party to stand solidly behind the Prime Minister's successor.

Speaking in one voice, they said that the best retirement gift that could be given to Dr Mahathir was ensuring that the party remains strong and ready for future challenges.

However, delegates managed to keep their emotions in check, proving wrong the initial fear by observers that the assembly would turn into a "very emotional gathering".

Members appeared to have got over the shock of Dr Mahathir's resignation announcement last year, as realisation dawned that everyone should respect the Prime Minister's decision to step down.

The expression of love for the president, who has led them for the past 22 years, was solid and meaningful since it was delivered by state liaison committee chiefs, most of whom are Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers.

In a departure from the norm, they were given the chance to take to the rostrum to debate the presidential address.

The heads of the party's three wings - Youth, Wanita and Puteri - also spoke on behalf of their members.

In fact, in recognition of the role and contribution of the younger generation, the motion of thanks on Dr Mahathir's speech was tabled by Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein and seconded by Puteri head Azalina Othman Said. Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz was the first to debate on the motion.

Dr Mahathir attentively followed the speeches, breaking into a smile occasionally.

Party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob had on Monday advised delegates to refrain from turning the assembly into a praising session for Dr Mahathir, but it was clear this was one directive which members dared to disobey.

Dr Mahathir had earlier opened the three-day assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre, his last as the president, with an address focusing on the future of the Malays and threats facing them.