

15/06/2003

Nor, Za and others wait eagerly for Dr M's 22nd assembly speech

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ALL eyes will be on the Putra World Trade Centre next week. The scene will be the 54th Umno general assembly, an event that is much awaited now more than ever. Nor and Za, two women in their 20s, told me they had applied for leave from work to be there to follow the proceedings and get a feel of the excitement.

The two ladies are not members of Umno even though they have been approached by Puteri, the youngest wing of the party. They have yet to fill in their forms and complete the formalities. The branches in Cheras and Shah Alam have been trying to get them to join as part of the re-generation process that each political party must take to ensure relevance and continued survival.

The two are sure there would be plenty of excitement. They missed last year's assembly and don't want to miss next week's. They, besides all Umno members and the rest of the country, are still talking about last year's event when party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad dropped a bombshell in his closing remarks.

Dr Mahathir then announced his intention to quit his political post, which triggered scenes of protests and emotion at the PWTC. There weren't many open displays of such emotion in Umno's recent history, whether the assembly was held in Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the Nirwana Ballroom of the Kuala Lumpur Hilton or the Dewan Merdeka itself.

Nor and Za are very sure there would be more excitement, though of a different kind this time around. Why different, I asked them. "Everyone knows that this is Dr M's last assembly as party president. I'm sure there are plenty of things he wants to say. You knowlah, our PM is not one to mince his words. He'll say what he wants to say ...or say what needs to be said," said Nor, a mother of two boys.

She's right of course. This is one Umno assembly most, if not all, members don't want to miss. Umno members are already taking up positions in the city. Try to get a hotel room - you'll be lucky to get one during the assembly period. As in previous years, an Umno assembly is good for business.

I am also sure that Dr Mahathir has given much thought to what he plans to say in his speech. It is a fact that his speech at the annual assembly is the most important one every year. It is a speech that he takes great pains to write and re-write. The end product has always been clear, crisp and thought-provoking.

It is a delight to process his speech and turn it into news. There will be repeat messages as well as new ideas and information. Having addressed the assembly as president 21 times, that is, almost half the existing life-span of the party, Dr Mahathir knows his audience. And knows them well.

Which explains why one can see the consistency of his argument. His delivery is smooth, as one would expect from a leader confident that the crowd is with him, even during the most trying of times. He has shed tears too, and often others have cried with him as well.

While his opening speech will be in the form of a prepared text, his closing will be off-the-cuff. And it is here that the man always excels. The president of the party always has the last word after the appropriate Umno ministers have rebutted or clarified matters or issues raised by members.

In his closing remarks, the party president will sum up the proceedings of the previous days and usually end with words of advice before delegates depart for home. It's a goodbye speech, in essence. Umno delegates to this assembly may shed a tear or two and I won't dismiss the possibility of yet another open display of love and affection for a man most regard as the guiding voice of Umno leadership.

I want to hear words of wisdom from him, even though I've heard many in previous assemblies. I expect him to take delegates up and down memory lane in so far as stressing the need for party members to keep true to party struggles. I won't be surprised if he also takes some delegates and members to task for straying from party ideals. As a newsman, I expect him to provide me with yet another Page One main news item.