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Consistent stress on familiar themes

UMNO members in particular, and the Malaysian public in general, will be expected to pay close attention to what Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has to say on Thursday's opening of the Umno general assembly because that will be his last as president of the party. In a long career, first as nationalist and parliamentarian, and then as head of a political party, prime minister, and a major leader of the developing world, there has arguably been a high degree of consistency in what he has had to say over the years.

One of the dominant motifs of his thoughts is that attitudes, value systems and ethics are crucial to personal and national development. This was reiterated in a recent TV interview when Dr Mahathir expressed concern that efforts to become a developed country could be derailed by a fraying of the moral fabric, as illustrated by the unchecked distribution of pornographic materials and the increase in drug abuse. Such self-indulgent and counter-productive behaviour is the result of the failure to instil moral values "in the heart of society", which he characterised as the "fortress against bad and evil".

Dr Mahathir's admiration of Japan stems mainly from its values of hard work, discipline, thrift and strong sense of community which characterise Japanese society and contributed to its growth as a modern, industrialised nation. This is why, as he put it, "we look to Japan".

In emphasising that Malaysia does not want to become wealthy at the expense of its culture, virtues and faith, he reaffirms the vision of a Malaysia that is fully developed in all the dimensions - economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically and culturally - which was first outlined in his Vision 2020 speech in 1991.

While maintaining a common core of ideas, Dr Mahathir has also displayed a capacity for innovative and unorthodox policies. So, while he can be expected to expound on familiar themes at the current Umno general assembly, it will not be out of character for him to spring a few surprises.