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Dr M: Stay united to protect Umno (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - In his last winding-up address to the Umno annual general assembly today, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad bade farewell to delegates with the same advice he gave on Thursday - be united and love and protect the party.

Displaying complete control of his emotions and speaking without a prepared text, the Umno president and Prime Minister urged members not to take the easy way out of any situation.

Instead, always go for the best and most effective, he said.

Dewan Merdeka was filled to capacity as delegates, observers, the Press corp, guests and secretariat staff waited for Dr Mahathir and selected Umno ministers to give their closing remarks after the lunch break.

Dr Mahathir, who had his lunch at the Riverside Restaurant on the ground floor of the World Trade Centre, entered the hall to prolonged applause from the crowd, who had stood up to greet him.

Umno members had gathered in full force at the PWTC, having arrived from all over the country.

They sat on the marbled floor and positioned themselves in front of the many closed-circuit television sets placed at the party headquarters.

Dr Mahathir was mobbed as he made his way back to Dewan Merdeka. The crowd shook his hand and some wanted to get their photographs taken with him. Similar attention was also given to his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, who stood by the Prime Minister throughout the day's proceedings.

Before the Prime Minister took to the rostrum, the preceding speakers had showered praise on him, and paid tribute to his many achievements. Throughout the speeches, Dr Mahathir listened attentively.

When his turn came, Dr Mahathir said: "I am thankful for all the praise. I appreciate them as I believe they are actually intended for the party leadership.

"I would be very worried if members no longer show their love and appreciation to party leaders. If this happens, it means that the party will be destroyed."

The declarations by two vice-presidents who many believe are in the running for the post of Umno deputy president and Deputy Prime Minister must have also gladdened Dr Mahathir's heart.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (Defence Minister) and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin (Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs) reiterated their earlier statements that they would respect and abide by whatever decision made by Abdullah when he picked his deputy.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir expressed his concern should there be contests for key posts in the party.

"I'm worried because some of us are not fully aware of the etiquette in a democratic contest. Sometimes, when we lose, and become too disappointed, we may go against the party."

He was hopeful that the upbeat mood and unity displayed at the assembly could be maintained and enhanced, especially when the party faced the general election.

Dr Mahathir had maintained throughout the assembly that he would leave his government and political posts in October and pave the way for Abdullah to succeed him.

He began his closing remarks by acknowledging the presence of thousands

of Umno members outside the main hall.

He also paid tribute to speakers during the three-day assembly.

His advice: "It's necessary for members to criticise the party, but they must be constructive. Choose your words carefully and be careful when criticising the party or leaders.

"Do not criticise to the point that the Opposition can pick on the issues and use them to hit us. If the criticisms are constructive, the party can improve. If not, they will be used against us."

Dr Mahathir's delivery was fiery at times, and spirited throughout.

Ending his speech with several pantun, Dr Mahathir said he decided to vacate his post when he recalled his mother's advice.

"I was told to stop eating before I become full; to leave before overstaying my welcome. I can leave now because I can see that Umno is strong again."

Delegates and members were heartened by Dr Mahathir's firm, energetic and strong delivery, showing confidence, evidence that Umno was on the upswing.

After his Press conference, Dr Mahathir, mobbed again, made his way back to Dewan Merdeka for a photography session with the choir, secretariat staff, food and beverage personnel from Putrade, the PWTC management, journalists and photographers and security personnel.

Earlier, when asked at the Press conference what his immediate plans were, he said: "I want to take a day off."