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For the faithful, a special way to bid farewell to the party president

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SPEAKERS at the Umno general assembly yesterday presented glowing accolades to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad from the comfortable confines of the Merdeka hall, but an equally important tribute session was taking place just outside.

A communal space has traditionally been demarcated at the Putra World Trade Centre to allow non-delegates consisting of ordinary branch members and the public to follow proceedings.

This area is just outside the Merdeka hall on the ground floor main lobby area, in front of the giant screen where speeches of Umno leaders and speakers at the party's annual general assembly are aired live.

Come assembly time, the area is marked off with a huge carpet to allow the party faithful to sit cross-legged and follow the speeches and debates live.

True to Malay custom, the area is off limits to footwear. The makcik and pakcik who enter this precious domain take off their shoes in respect, lending a communal atmosphere to proceedings.

Yesterday, the party faithful turned up and made themselves comfortable at their "special place" in full force.

By 9am, there was hardly any area left for the latecomers, but they insisted.

Attendance had by then spilled over from the carpeted area in front of the screen, but the latecomers showed their respects nonetheless, taking off their shoes to sit on the uncarpeted floor.

They were there to watch and listen to Dr Mahathir make the first of two of his last speeches at this - his final - party assembly as Umno president.

When Dr Mahathir began his opening speech, many seemed unaffected.

Perhaps they expected a more fiery presentation but, true to form, the party president chose to communicate plainly.

He spent much of his speech outlining how today's unipolar world order posed dangers to the Bumiputera community.

Many in the audience were already familiar with the theme.

Dr Mahathir had often repeated in past speeches his rejoinder to the Bumiputera and Malays, which he himself famously declared, were a people "who forget easily" (Melayu mudah lupa).

Out in the communal space where the party faithful had congregated, there were some signs of restlessness.

Part of the audience took the opportunity to take a break and stretch their legs.

Dr Mahathir, having spent much of his speech spelling out the dangers awaiting the Bumiputera from external threats, then narrowed his focus.

And when he started talking about Umno and its future outlook, the party faithful sat up: it seemed as if Dr Mahathir was no longer addressing them as Prime Minister and leader of the country, but solely as the president of their party.

From that point on, the physical boundary separating the Umno president in the Merdeka Hall and the party faithful outside seemed to disappear, judging by their rapt attention to his words.

When Dr Mahathir stated how Umno could not be defeated by any other party but by enemies within who placed their self-interests above that of Umno's, they stood up and clapped their hands in support.

When the party president remarked how those who were out to sabotage Umno from within were better off leaving the party, they cheered in agreement.

And then Dr Mahathir, in wrapping up his speech, finally addressed not only the delegates, but also each and every Umno member.

Asking forgiveness for any mistakes and errors which he had committed during his tenure as party president, Dr Mahathir explained how everything he had done was in the interests of Umno.

And when he finally recited aloud a prayer seeking blessings for Umno, many among the faithful, who had by now crammed the lobby area to full capacity, were overwhelmed with emotion.

The full realisation seemed to hit them that after his closing speech on Saturday, Dr Mahathir will no longer be addressing them as party president in the next general assembly.

The makcik and pakcik, who have quietly supported the party and patiently sat cross-legged outside the Merdeka hall during its assemblies year after year, will likely be here for the next two days.

The rostrum-thumping, spotlight-flooded praise and gratitude expressed by speakers and delegates in the hall will probably be the ones that go on record, but the party faithful are outside nonetheless.

They may not gain direct recognition for their efforts, but seem determined to make their special farewell to their party president, out in their own small but special patch at the PWTC.