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Listen, understand, carry out - that's what this Umno assembly is all

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DELEGATES to Umno's 54th general assembly this week have a couple of important assignments. They always have important assignments but perhaps they have to be more attentive now than previous assemblies.

Throughout the three-day assembly proper and the one-day meeting of the Pemuda, Wanita and Puteri wings, delegates must speak clearly and with certainty. They will need to focus not only on what they have to do with and to their party, but how their party is going to deal with a totally new scenario in the following months.

There will be 2,248 delegates in Dewan Merdeka plus thousands others within the Putra World Trade Centre vicinity. All of them, including invited local and foreign guests, observers, the media, and walk-in visitors will be anxious to hear what many say is the last speech by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Dr Mahathir has said that he planned to step down in October. It was at the same assembly last year that he announced his desire, which led to widespread protests within the party that he should continue. He agreed to stay on but come October he insisted that he will pass the baton to his successor.

That being the case, his speech on Thursday will be his last. Undoubtedly, he will have much to say, and the delegates will have much to listen to.

They have listened to him every year over the last 21 years, but Thursday's articulation holds far more significance than ever before.

Back to the delegates' assignments. Their first assignment is to listen carefully to Dr Mahathir's speeches, of which there will be two. The first will be delivered according to a text prepared by him, as in previous years. This will be the 22nd time Dr Mahathir addresses the general assembly, each time imparting his thoughts and ideas as to how Umno should administer itself, and, by extension, lead the national coalition.

Delegates and everyone else can expect the Prime Minister not to mince his words as he believes in saying what he means and means what he says. Nothing more, nothing less.

It is incumbent upon delegates (and everyone else in and outside Dewan Merdeka) to take in every word and understand his message. Dr Mahathir will have long and hard messages for everyone.

If the delegates pay attention to Dr Mahathir's speech, then they may see a new roadmap for the party, and country.

Dr Mahathir spends a lot of time preparing his speech, and is known to have written and rewritten it several times until he is satisfied. In the 21 years he has spoken at the assembly, never has he deviated from the prepared text except to ad lib depending on the audience's reaction.

The delegates and the nation will be waiting for whatever messages he has to convey. One can expect him to cover some old ground, such as party and national unity, to learn from history, to look at Malaysia in relation to the rest of an increasingly unipolar world and to look at an individual's mindset in terms of meeting future challenges. It being an Umno assembly, one can expect him to dwell at length on party affairs.

Some people predict that Dr Mahathir's speech will be full of emotion. Passionate may be more accurate to describe it. Dr Mahathir is not an orator in the traditional sense of the word - all fiery and worked up. He is a communicator, an eloquent one at that. Hence, Umno delegates must

concentrate and listen carefully to each word.

Equally interesting, and perhaps even more passionate, will be his closing speech, which he will deliver off-the-cuff. This, many will tell you, is a speech from the heart. If delegates are to shed a tear or two on Saturday, they will probably be joined by others.

Delegates should look into their records and search for Dr Mahathir's speech made at the 1984 assembly. One paragraph that stood out said: "I can offer nothing to Umno and the nation but the service which I can still provide. As long as I have life and means, and as long as I am required, I will serve the party and nation. Only I pray to God that when my service is no longer required I will become aware of it and recognise the signs and retire with sincerity."

Many in the party will say that his services are still needed. And here is the delegates' second assignment. If they love and respect him the way they say they do, then they must learn to allow their party president to leave the stage the way he wants to. In fact, they should then seek ways and means to carry on his struggle, and to implement his vision to make Malaysia a developed nation by 2020.

For the sake of Dr Mahathir's heritage in the party, delegates must speak with one, strong and clear voice that party unity will be enhanced. If there is anything that Dr Mahathir fears most politically, it's the conflict in Umno which could lead to its destruction. He can be expected to remind delegates and members to remain united at whatever cost.

Dr Mahathir had often used himself as an example. He has said it many times before: "I am where I am because of support from other people. I will now support my successor." In this regard, he wants Umno members to throw their weight behind Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who will eventually carry the party baton. This assembly gives delegates and members an opportunity to prove their love to the party by following his advice.

The assembly holds much promise for Umno members specifically, and for the nation by extension. Delegates may want to pay tribute to Dr Mahathir, led probably by state party leaders who have been tasked with debating the presidential address. As a reminder, Dr Mahathir is not one to bask in words of praise, and the assembly may not be the platform to do so.

The man's contribution to the party must be recognised, but this is better done tastefully. The best form of praise would be to emulate him in words and deeds. That, really, is the main assignment for everyone at tending the assembly.

What about the preceeding Pemuda, Wanita and Puteri assemblies? As important wings of the party, they will need to focus their energies on the future and forge more meaningful tie-ups not only with each other but with outsiders as well. An increasingly confident Pak Lah will declare open their assemblies jointly with words of advice.

History is unfolding. Umno delegates will be among the first to witness and be a part of it.