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Lively celebration marks 57th year

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Stadium Merdeka, the nation's historical landmark that many Malaysians have almost forgotten, came alive with the reverberating shouts of Hidup Melayu and Hidup Umno tonight as Umno celebrated its 57th anniversary.

Led by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, some 40,000 Umno leaders, members and supporters braved the drizzle to demonstrate their spirit of patriotism and sense of pride at the venue.

It was here 46 years ago that Umno's second president and the nation's first Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra led the people in the cries of Merdeka, signalling the birth of a new nation.

Tonight, the sky exploded in fireworks. Paratroopers carrying pictures of the party's four past presidents - Datuk Onn Jaafar, Tengku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and Tun Hussein Onn - and Dr Mahathir landed in the field.

For many of the people there, it was a touching moment when Dr Mahathir arrived, accompanied by Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali. It was his first party function since returning from a two-month leave. Young and old appeared over-whelmed.

In the packed stadium were Barisan Nasional component party leaders.

Earlier, on arrival, Dr Mahathir and deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi were taken on horse-drawn carriages around the stadium, accompanied by 57 motorcycles to the cheers of Hidup Umno and Hidup Melayu.

Dr Mahathir inspected a guard-of-honour mounted by members of the Youth, Wanita and Puteri wings, each comprising 57 members to signify the 57th anniversary of the party.

They were also joined by 57 Umno veterans.

Accompanying him were Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, Wanita head Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Puteri head Azalina Othman Said.

Dr Mahathir then hoisted the Umno flag as the party's song was played followed by a doa and a speech by party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob.

He then delivered his keynote address and proceeded to cut the pulut kuning.

The celebration, themed "The Struggle of a Nation", was telecast live over TV1.

Umno members received bags containing a souvenir book that chronicles the contributions of the party towards the development of the Malays and the Islamic world.