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Living next door to Mahathir Mohamad

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ANOTHER chapter in the Mahathir saga came to an end on Saturday (June 21) when the 54th Umno General Assembly was adjourned. To the surprise of many, it was a happy ending.

The delegates, observers and ordinary members who filled every nook and corner of the Putra World Trade Centre had not expected such a cheerful ending.

They were prepared, literally - with handkerchiefs and tissue papers in hand - to shed more tears. They had expected Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to break down the way he momentarily did on the opening day of the assembly.

Instead, it ended on a high note with Dr Mahathir lifting everybody's spirit with his cheerful round-up address - his last at an Umno General Assembly.

The emotions that he and members of the Supreme Council felt were translated into pledges and promises to put the party above personal considerations.

He and his anointed successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, shared laughter, compliments and personal notes - something that neither is known to be good at. The show of confidence augurs well for the party.

It was a befitting farewell for a party president who had done so much and gone through so many challenges in the 20 over years that he had been at the helm of Umno and the Government.

Although he will not be retiring until October, his last formal duty as Umno President had been performed. Addressing the annual general assembly is the highest honour and the most important duty of a party president.

Many still could not bear the thought of living without Dr Mahathir or believing that he would actually leave despite the fact that a full year had passed since he confirmed his decision to retire and set this coming October as the date for his departure.

A whole generation grew up to know nobody else but Dr Mahathir as prime minister. Excuse the writer for being personal. Three years ago, when calling on Dr Mahathir to inform him of my decision to resign from the post of group editor-in-chief of the New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Bhd, I said anybody who is 20 years old knew nobody but him.

He responded, saying that even those in their thirties knew only him as prime minister. We were talking about the need for Umno and the Government to appeal to the younger generation if they wanted to remain in power.