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Malaysians throw surprise dinner for Dr M and wife

Zainul Arifin

SOME 400 Malaysians in the United States residing in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Washington DC and Massachusetts threw a "surprise" dinner in honour of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Wednesday night.

While the invitation stipulated that men should be clad in dark coloured suits and the women in prim evening dresses, the atmosphere was anything but sedate.

The crowd erupted in loud cheers, hoots and whistles when Dr Mahathir entered the restaurant where the dinner was held. The dinner was especially meaningful for the Malaysians there as it would be the Prime Minister's last with them before retiring next month.

Dr Mahathir was in town for the 58th United Nations General Assembly.

Most attending the dinner had left Malaysia to seek fame and fortune in the US. It was obvious that they were as happy to see the guest of honour as he was to see them.

Dr Mahathir and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali were truly surprised by the grand dinner celebration.

"I was curious where the car was taking us. They just said we are going for a Chinese dinner in Chinatown," Dr Mahathir told those in attendance later.

The event, held in a room bedecked with the national and State flags, started with an emphatic rendition of Negaraku followed by Keranamu Malaysia.

The dinner was hosted by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar. In attendance were Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng, Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Deputy Information Minister Datuk Zainudin Maidin, Members of Parliament and diplomats.

The crowd was huge. Many stopped outside the Grand Harmony restaurant, 98, Mott Street, in Chinatown New York, on their way home from work. They couldn't be blamed for their curiosity - there were two Jalur Gemilang placed outside the restaurant, a row of black limousines, and Secret Service agents paced the five-foot-way.

Some of the onlookers tried to edge their way in but could not as the restaurant was bursting at the seams with diners.

Dr Mahathir said he was proud that while Malaysians lived everywhere in the world, they never forgot their home country.

He hoped they would also support his anointed successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Well-known singer Khatijah Ibrahim and 1970s icon Sakura, both with businesses in the city, provided entertainment.

Also performing was a New York-based Malaysian cultural troupe - made up of amateur dancers from Malaysia, Singapore, Japan and China - who impressed with their colourful costumes and adept handling of various traditional dances.

It was a rather emotional occasion, with Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah said to have shed a tear or two following a poignant rendition of the song Legenda by Khatijah.

A long, standing ovation for Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah capped the evening. And as expected, everyone lined up to have their pictures taken with the ever obliging couple at the end of the function.