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No-contest pledge by vice-presidents highlight of assembly

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PERHAPS the most important outcome of the 54th Umno general assembly which ended yesterday was the no-contest pledge by Umno vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

In their winding-up speeches at the close of the assembly, they declared they would not challenge Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's choice of successor.

Any one of the three could succeed to the deputy premiership when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad steps down in October and Abdullah takes over.

Taking the cue from Dr Mahathir, Abdullah and delegates who took part in the debates, the three gave their word they would not rock the boat.

Dr Mahathir's concern that the jostling for posts will disunite the party has thus been addressed.

With that, delegates emerged from the assembly with renewed vigour and resolve to stay united to ensure the party remains strong into the future.

The atmosphere was emotionally charged both in the hall, and outside among those gathered for this historic occasion.

But all emerged with a common goal, to give Dr Mahathir - attending his last assembly as Umno president - the best farewell gift ever in the form of an overwhelming victory in the next general election.

Unity is, therefore, the key. Umno members are now, more than ever, aware that a victorious outcome is only possible if they don't fight among themselves, but against the real enemy - Pas.

The party's three wings have also pledged their support to Abdullah.

The no-contest commitment will likely result in the person appointed by Abdullah being unchallenged for the deputy president's post next year.

By convention, the Deputy Prime Minister is also Umno deputy president.

Another significant result of this assembly, which saw all resolutions on economy, religion and education passed, is the rallying of members to stand resolutely as one to crush Pas in the next general election.

The dissolution of Parliament may be months away but the war drums have been sounded, with members psyching themselves to unleash their might against the enemy.

Umno Terengganu, for instance, has launched "gelombang biru" (blue tidal wave) against Pas' ripples of green. (The Barisan Nasional's symbol is blue while green is Pas' colour.)

Even Dr Mahathir himself was impressed by the spirited air of the members.

"I am confident we will fare better than in 1999. That much I can assure you," the Prime Minister said yesterday when asked about Umno's chances of recapturing Kelantan and Terengganu from Pas.

This assembly also displayed the mettle of the younger generation in Umno.

Puteri, the youngest wing in the party - having their assembly for the first time jointly with Wanita and Umno Youth - showed that age is no barrier to excellence in politics.

Chief Azalina Othman Said gave a stirring speech, cautioning that Puteri should not be taken lightly "for don't think we have no brains".

The recognition by the party of the younger generation was evident when Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein was given the privilege of tabling the motion of thanks on the presidential address, with Azalina

supporting it.

Not to be outdone, Wanita Umno reaffirmed that it remains the backbone and workhorse of the party's election machinery.

What is also unique about this assembly was the extensive recital of sajak and pantun by delegates. It produced many light moments, but the intended messages were still effectively conveyed.

Umno leaders and members also heaped accolades on Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali for her sacrifices as wife of the tireless Prime Minister.

Immediately preceding the winding-up session yesterday, a journalist - the New Straits Times group editor Datuk Ahmad A. Talib - in an unprecedented gesture, read a sajak dedicated to Dr Mahathir.

Next to take the podium was supreme council member Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman who started the last chapter of the assembly, the winding-up.

Dr Mahathir closed the assembly with a poignant yet inspiring speech.

When Dr Mahathir stepped out of the hall, he was besieged by party members clamouring to shake his hand and wish him well.

It was also obviously apparent that the assembly this year has a larger following than in previous years.

Not only were there more delegates and observers - it was almost impossible to enter the PWTC, with a sea of people crowding the entrances - the number of stalls had almost doubled, spilling outside the complex.

The fiery atmosphere in the hall was replicated outside, with the bargaining between peddlers and buyers as "hot" as the tone of speeches in Dewan Merdeka.