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Remembering and learning from Dr Mahathir's contributions to the nation

Abdul Razak Ahmad

VISITORS unfamiliar with the layout of the Putra World Trade Centre can easily get lost trying to find the Merdeka Hall, where the Umno general assembly proceedings are held.

Take a wrong turn as you enter the PWTC and you can spend hours in the maze of winding alleys in between the more than 400 stalls set up.

It is quite a challenge to navigate among the boisterous traders and jostling shoppers, but the sense of disorientation does not end after the noisy confusion of the PWTC bazaar.

For some among the assembly delegates, the sense of disorientation was carried right into the Merdeka Hall.

A delegate, in trying to absorb the gist of the party president's advice to them and his "roadmap" on the future direction of the party, would have found himself or herself bombarded with a mind-boggling array of expressions of thanks to party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Perhaps it was due to the long salutations and other forms of respect expected of the Malay to his leaders and elders and which the speakers dutifully made.

They are, for a party that represents the aspirations of the Bumiputera, an unwritten requirement.

During the debate on the motion of thanks to the president's opening address, throughout Thursday and continuing yesterday until noon, the speakers repeatedly thanked Dr Mahathir for all that he had done for Umno and the country.

Despite his call for this year's assembly to be run normally and that he was not out for compliments, some of the speakers were insistent.

In Bahasa Malaysia, extensive gratitude is sometimes expressed by quantifying it by the thousands. Ribuan terimakasih, as the phrase goes, is literally translated into "thousands of thank you".

But the gratitude here is, after all, aimed at a person who is extraordinary by any measure of his achievements.

Throughout this episode, Dr Mahathir at times seemed uncomfortable but he sat patiently through it all.

For several of the journalists covering the assembly, it was a patient wait to sift through the superficialities to get to the suggestions offered by delegates on how to memorialise Dr Mahathir's legacy.

Fortunately, there were several, some of which were quite practical.

Perlis and Kelantan Umno, for example, suggested a centre or institute to examine the thinking and philosophies of Dr Mahathir, which could create references to be used in continued efforts to develop Bumiputeras.

Perhaps this is a better way to express gratitude to the party president - by remembering and learning from his legacy.

But with each State party representative allocated time to debate the motion of thanks, successive speakers tried to ensure their presentations were at least as good, if not better than the others.

Some chose to capture the significance of the historic moment through pantun.

Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, for example, ended his proposal on the motion of thanks with a simple pantun: Buah cempedak di atas pagar; (The cempedak hangs over the fence)

Masak sebiji dibawa ke pasar, (One ripens and is taken to market)

Saya budak baru belajar; (I am just a youngster in learning)

Tolong dibimbing ditunjuk ajar. (Please guide and show me the way)

Some thought it was an apt gesture by Hishammuddin to show his respect for the party president.

The pantun "session" culminated in Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz's presentation.

Well-known for her precise speeches with rapid-fire delivery, Rafidah gave an emotional rendition of a 12-verse pantun.

Dr Mahathir has in the past urged the Malays to discard some of the aspects of their culture incompatible with development.

Traits such as overemphasis on fate instead of effort have been cited as a characteristic that the Malays should shed in order to develop.

But when it comes to expressing gratitude, the speakers were adamant at making sure they got things right.

Perhaps such carefully (and at times excessively) crafted presentations were due to valid concerns.

But all the praise in the world is not what the party president is looking for.

As he himself stated during his address on Thursday, evaluation and judgment on his performance throughout his 22 years as party president and the country's leader is left solely to the people.

The gist of the message that he wanted to communicate to the party was the importance of unity, the dangers of in-fighting, and the need to continually strive to better the Bumiputera community.

For many of the delegates who went on to discuss the motions on the economy, religion and education, this message must have been elusive. Many were still outside the hall after the afternoon break for lunch and Friday prayers had ended.

Repeated reminders were made to delegates to return to the hall by 2.45pm so that the debate could continue at 3pm, but it was noted how Dr Mahathir arrived about 2.50pm to find only about a third of the Merdeka Hall occupied.