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To the future with renewed resolve

EVEN with the best efforts of its hard-headed politicians, this year's Umno general assembly was never going to be business as usual. But apart from the encomia, the expected outpouring of praise and gratitude to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the operating principle of the just-ended 54th conclave was that the work of the party president remains unfinished. There was heartfelt emotion, a sense of bereavement, an unspoken omen of doubt about the future. But there was also confidence, fortitude and renewed resolve after the drying of tears.

The void that Dr Mahathir will leave in the party, Government and nation is large. No man has had so profound an influence on the configuration of national politics and the country's development than the Prime Minister. As Umno delegates discovered, it is hard to wish him farewell, the more so when his departure this October has not been forced by failure or ill-health.

As aptly put by Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Dr Mahathir is an institution. It would be impossible to recite all of his achievements in the past 22 years, to honour the debt of millions in the oratory of a single party conference. A special assembly should be convened in November to formally bid him goodbye and welcome Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Suffice it to say that he has modernised Islam, the citizenry and Malaysia. He has embarked on an exhilarating wave of public policy inception, innovation and refinement - seismic in their dimension and impact.

His critics will constantly find fault with his pluralist democracy. It is a measure of his integrity that he has managed to answer them all, and in time prove them wrong. Apart from parliamentary legislation, as well as constitutional change, Dr Mahathir has reinvigorated executive leadership. The rakyat has reaped the benefits of his decisive and pragmatic action, in unity, prosperity and harmony. The amplitude, significance and enduring richness of the nation's development point to an indefatigable intelligence, which we hope will not be content to stay still when Dr Mahathir trades his position from premier to pensioner. More than any other national leader, he has exemplified the importance of being in constant critical dialogue with ideas - be it from the West or East - and the struggles of our age.

Dr Mahathir did much to build the ethos and strengthen the purpose of Umno and the Malays. As he has done to the country, he has guided the party's evolution, exercising substantial suasion over on its ideology and ideals. His last advice to the party is poignant: Do not betray Umno. It is compelling advice, given the fact that, increasingly, politics has come to be regarded not as a platform for public service but as a war of interests - a war without bloodshed - in which much "loot" is to be gained. Umno has been a victim of this war when the party was declared illegal, which was in itself a betrayal by those who could not bear to accept defeat with dignity. It is a history that must not be repeated.

Dr Mahathir closed his last party assembly on a high note. Do not fear the serban and jubah of Pas, he said, for Umno is the true champion and defender of Islam and the Malays. Do not look for the easy way out but persevere with devotion in the correct path. He ended his valedictory speech in verse, and it is up to us, Umno and Malaysia, to prove that his sacrifices are not in vain and live up to the poetic spirit of his hopes

and dreams.