

**Election war drums keep Umno delegates in check**  
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If anyone had doubts as to whether Prime Minister and Umno president Najib Abdul Razak is in control given the raging racial debates and polemics occurring of late, they would have been erased after the Umno general assembly which concluded yesterday.

This year's assembly was a rare departure from the usual fiery debates, in which Umno speakers in the past would have looked for their 15 minutes of stardom by breathing fire and brimstone on Malay rights and the rights of other races.

For this year's debaters, with the exception of a handful of delegates, were relatively subdued, if chartered against their performance in previous years.

Although the quality of debates varied from one speaker to another, it's clear that there was one thing in common - they were more careful not to incite racial sentiments to the point of rage with the non-Malays.

Possibly the thought of the general election looming in the not too distant future - in which Umno youth leader Khairy Jamaluddin emphasised that BN could lose up to 50 seats if it ditched non-Malay votes - served as a sobering dash of reality.

In addition, maybe Najib's pre-assembly closed-door briefing worked. It's understood that he had told the 2,500-odd delegates to tone down on the racial rhetoric.

If it hadn't dawned on them then, the point would have been driven home when he delivered his policy speech - usually the most important speech in the assembly - that racial debates must end.

He left no loose ends untied when he reiterated that change must also come from Umno and the Malays, in the wake of incidents where school teachers were said to have told their non-Malay students to *balik Cina* or *balik India*.

Stressing the point of "inclusiveness", Najib, together with his vice-presidents and wing chiefs, took great pains to tell the delegates that being insular will only make them lose votes in the elections.

The memo may have been lost on a delegate or two who had, in their speeches, demanded that the equity target be raised from 30 to 65 percent to mirror the country's demographics.

Not a word on Perkasa

It would not be far-fetched to say that race relations as well as the concept of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) are the first thing on their minds, considering the recent racially-tinged incidences as well as the surging popularity of right-wing Malay rights movements.

One delegate from Malacca turned up the heat when he claimed that the non-Malay BN component parties have been insincere with helping Malays achieve the 30 percent equity target, causing the permanent chairperson Badruddin Amirudin (*left*) to crack a joke in an attempt to lighten up the potentially hostile speech.

But despite references to Malay rights and special privileges, delegates as well as party leaders did not discuss the role of the Malay rights NGO Perkasa, which at one point, appeared to be in heavy competition with Umno for Malay backing.

While this could be a sign of ease between the party and the NGO, which claims that 60 percent of its members are from Umno - the politically-correct explanation offered was that Perkasa is a non-issue since Umno has reiterated that its stand on the Malay struggle has not changed since its inception in 1946.

So where else did all eyes and ears turn as targets for Umno - naturally, the Pakatan Rakyat coalition parties, especially DAP.

DAP's turn on the burner

The favourite target of Umno delegates has always been their former comrades, who left to form PKR.



Year after year, volleys would usually be unleashed against PKR *de facto* leader Anwar Ibrahim (*left*), with the former Umno number two being painted as a "traitor to the race" and a "sellout to the West".

This year, however, the delegates were relatively soft on him, but DAP put DAP on the burner instead, calling the party "Chinese chauvinists" and the beginning to the end of Malay rights.

Penang chief minister and DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng became an easy target after months of intense bad publicity in the mainstream media against his policies.

Even vice-president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi termed the DAP administration in the state as "neo-colonialism".

But even Najib must have felt the heat from Pakatan's campaign to capture Putrajaya, making it one of the main touchpoints in his speech to defend the government at all costs.

And with the numerous references to defending Putrajaya as Umno and BN's jewel in the crown, it is almost too easy to conclude snap polls are in the near future.

'Reshuffle' to keep members on tenterhooks

The PM, however, kept coy in the press conference held immediately after the assembly's closing ceremony.

From now onwards, they will have their hands full speculating as to his announcement of a reshuffle in the party leadership.

Acknowledging that the party has its fair share of infighting, Najib made a surprise announcement that an overhaul in the party was in the offing and telling them to start rolling up their sleeves to recapture or retain states for BN.



Whether fellow BN component parties would be upset over the delegates' speeches (MCA has already sent a press statement of protest), it is now more than likely that all negativity will be forgotten in their fight at the Galas and Batu Sapi by-elections, and that the general elections are looming on the horizon.

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