



*The opening ceremony of the Wanita UMNO gathering*

# BREAKING NEW GROUNDS

Umno's 56<sup>th</sup> assembly was a rejuvenated affair with some hot topics being debated.

*By Habhajan Singh*

**I**t was no election year. Yet, Umno, the country's dominant political party, witnessed debates with intensity not seen in many years. The appetite for critical introspection found its way onto the floor. Even a seasoned minister was bombarded with criticism and the assembly heard some 'tough messages'.

As party president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi made his second appearance before the Umno assembly, one could sense rejuvenation in the air. After a smooth transition the year before, Umno's 56<sup>th</sup> assembly saw Abdullah stamping his mark on the party.

In a way, it was Abdullah's coming out party. He was relaxed, calm and jovial, even when facing the straight talking delegates. Yet, the clarity of purpose and the unflinching resolve to break new grounds was clear for all to see.

It was most evident when he touched on economic matters. He called a spade a spade, noting that the latest statistics indicated that the 'New Economic Policy (NEP)'s targets have only been partially achieved'.

What went wrong? Abdullah went straight to the point, saying, "This has not been due to faults in the policy. Among the factors that have contributed to the inability to achieve the targets were leakages at the implementation stage. This is because of the actions of rent-seekers who prioritise short-term gains."

Members of the 60-year-old party were equally blunt and open in voicing their opinions. Pemuda Umno, the party's youth wing, raised a number of issues, chief being the call to re-engineer the NEP spirit. Then, there was the hounding of Wanita Umno head Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz on the approved permits (AP) issue.

During her winding up speech on the last day, the booing and jeering, at times, drowned the voice of the seasoned politician. For the Minister of International Trade and Industry, this was probably her most trying political hour.

The disquiet over the distribution of the permits to import cars has been growing over the weeks. It came to a boiling point at the assembly, with intense questioning at the Pemuda Umno assembly.

By closing day on Saturday, it was clear Rafidah badly needed to clear the air. In her usual combative manner, she devoted a huge chunk of her closing speech on the issue. She tried to explain how 36 companies managed to get their hands on the permits to bring in 44 makes of cars.

'Believe me when I say...' Before she could finish the line, Dewan Merdeka, the centre-stage for the Umno meeting, was already filling up with 'boos'. Segments in the crowd had definitely made up their minds on the matter.

'The approach and issues raised were critical, something we've not seen at least in the past 10 years,' says Umno supreme council member and former minister Datuk Shahrir Samad, commenting on the overall atmosphere at the five-day Umno assembly.

The mood was partially set by Abdullah himself. Shahrir pointed out similar changes

taking place at the Parliament where he heads its Public Accounts Committee (PAC). 'In Parliament, you can see the tone. It would be unreasonable that only Parliament is critical, not Umno. In fact, Umno should be more critical,' he says.

A foreign diplomat, mingling amongst the crowded floors of the Putra World Trade Centre, noted the changes in Abdullah's tack. 'He dares to say hard things at a time when people were expecting handouts,' he says.

It was indeed a steely resolve to keep onto the less popular track. In the months before the assembly, contractors affected by the slashing of Government projects, for example, called for the return to days of plenty.

### Economy

In the early days of the assembly, Pemuda Umno fired the salvo with demands for the continuation of the spirit of affirmative action of the NEP.

In his speech, Pemuda Umno head Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Hussein called for the reintroduction of the NEP for the Malays to have an equitable share of the economic pie. The movement wants the policy to be implemented from now until 2020 to ensure the Malays remained in the mainstream of development. Outlining priority areas, he listed, among others, that of maintaining 30% equity ownership for the Malays and ensuring that they dominate selected property sectors.

The Prime Minister had a thing or two to say on the 30% NEP target. Elaborating on the errors of the past, he noted that the opportunities in the past were abused. 'Permits, facilities, contracts and licences which were allocated to Bumiputeras were instead handed over to others for a quick profit. Having done so, they asked for new opportunities once, twice, and more. As a consequence, a class of Malays arose that turned being middlemen into a full-time profession,' says Abdullah.

In an unsettling message, the Prime Minister noted how some Bumiputeras squandered opportunities meant to increase the community's equity ownership targets.

'Tragically, for the Malays, these shares were sold almost immediately for quick gain. There were also individuals who were trusted to helm companies, but became satisfied with a mere symbolic involvement

and chose to remain in the sidelines. Even more tragic for the Malays were those who betrayed the trust of a community and committed fraud. Apart from failing the objectives of the NEP, these leakages have tarnished the image of Malays and eroded the confidence of others towards us,' he says.

'No one can deny that, in the past, there are those among us who have received too much assistance and too many chances. There are those who have not received

enough assistance and those who have not been given opportunities at all. This is not fair and far from just. This cannot continue,' says Abdullah. 'There will never be enough contracts, licences, permits or scholarships for all Bumiputeras. Awarding licences and permits without taking into account merit and performance is also a form of wastage. We cannot turn a blind eye and take these matters lightly.'

### Pemuda Umno

The youth wing certainly stood out this time around, providing one of the defining elements at the recently concluded assembly. They were in top form. After the severe blow in the 1997 political crisis following the departure of then Umno Deputy President Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the youth wing has certainly rediscovered its footing.

You could see Pemuda was at its peak,' says Umno Supreme Council member Datuk Mohamad Norza Zakaria. 'They were tackling sensitive issues without being overtaken by emotions.'

The credit goes largely to Hishamuddin. The Education Minister has been toiling endlessly to rebuild Pemuda Umno from ground zero. The movement was almost decapitated by the exodus of its first liners. On the lighter side, even Hishamuddin's deputy, Khairy Jamaluddin, got a warm welcome.

At the last assembly, Khairy, Abdullah's son-in-law, was booed on the very floor he received applause this time around. Then, many resented his rapid rise to the coveted position in the youth wing, uncontested at that. One year later, the 29-year-old had managed to turn the tables, projecting a more gentle and humble front.

### Unsettled business

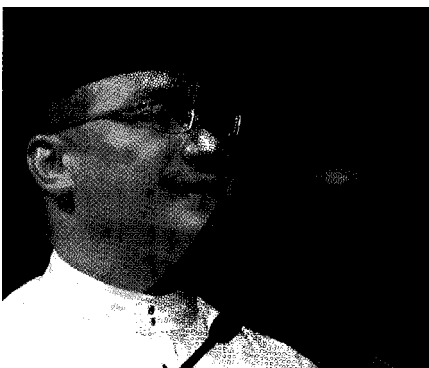
But there are still unsettled businesses within Umno. Very high on the list would be to rid the party of corruption. In the past party election, the party had been riddled with corrupt practices, including blatant vote buying.

'Let's make the next election the cleanest in the party's history,' came the call from Umno Deputy President Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

A tall order. But one worth trying for the good of the nation. mb



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*Khairy got a warm welcome this time around*