

Finding strength in fairness

AFTER three days of debate, which saw some fiery and emotional attacks on other races, Umno president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi slammed the brakes and reminded his party members that they must never forget the rights of the others. He also told them that no race could rule the country on its own.

Using the same statesman-like tone as his opening address, Abdullah closed the assembly by saying no race would be sidelined and similarly, Umno, and the Malays, as the dominant members of the ruling coalition, must always be fair and just to all Malaysians.

This, he said, had been the basic fundamental which defined Umno's rule since independence.

"Otherwise, we would have been voted out," he said, reminding some of the more outspoken delegates who had stated that Umno should use its power to seek a greater share of the country's wealth for the Malays.

"Everybody wants fairness. They want fair leaders. Therefore, we must ensure that we, as leaders, can be fair so that there will be no reason for them (other races) to abandon us."

The prime minister said fairness was a strength and Umno must use this strength to discharge its responsibilities in a trustworthy and responsible manner.

"We must be responsible not only to our race but also to other races who have accepted our leadership."

Focusing on the other subject heatedly debated — Islam — Abdullah told the delegates that Islam decreed that its followers must be fair and just.

"Why does Allah order us to be fair to human beings — regardless of race and religion? There must be a wisdom behind it because Muslims

may lead groups from different racial and religious backgrounds."

Without referring to some of the more extreme demands made by some delegates — but making it plainly obvious that he was referring to them—Abdullah said Umno leaders must always make decisions which could be accepted by the non-Malays.

"We must never forget the rights of other races as stipulated under the Constitution. We must uphold the Constitution which was agreed upon by past leaders — both Malays and non-Malays."

Abdullah acknowledged that Umno members had the right to debate issues relating to the Malays and to voice their aspirations. But at the same time, he cautioned, "we, as leaders of all Malaysians, must never forget their needs as well".

Abdullah pointed out that all the leaders of the different communities within the Barisan Nasional had to deal with demands from their communities as well.

"I, (Datuk Seri) Najib (Razak) and others in the BN supreme council understand this.

Other races also want their rights to be recognised and preserved and their interests looked after. No race will get 100 per cent of what they ask for and no race will walk away empty-handed. We will continue to make decisions in the spirit of BN, emphasising tolerance and co-operation."

He said the concept of power sharing was the best formula for the country and it was not easy to make decisions which satisfied everyone a hundred per cent. But whatever decisions made by the coalition were made by consensus.

"It is not easy to reach a decision. Only experienced leaders will understand the heavy responsibility they shoulder in deciding what was good for everyone."

Again, tactfully reminding the Umno members that the government had provided many opportunities for them, Abdullah said there were also many opportunities avail-

able for the community under the Ninth Malaysia Plan — which he pointedly said was supported and agreed to by the Cabinet.

Last year, in his address to Umno delegates, Abdullah, had spoken about how many such opportunities had been wasted by leakages, rent seeking and abuse.

He did not refer to his message last year but told delegates that it would be "very sad" if the opportunities under the 9MP were squandered again.

"I will be very, very sad — sadder than hearing criticisms hurled against me — if they give away the contracts to other people. Such acts are shameful and very embarrassing."

The non-Malays, Abdullah said, would also be very happy "if the Malays undertake themselves the contracts given to them. We must always seek to improve ourselves if we want to succeed".

At a Press conference later, Abdullah said he did not think that race and religious issues in the country had got out of hand.

"If it is out of hand, you will have demonstrations on the street."

The prime minister also did not think that what was spoken in the assembly would be taken personally outside by the delegates.

"They were expressing their feelings...", he added.

Abdullah, however, had one regret — that delegates did not debate enough about corruption, a key theme in his presidential address on Wednesday.

"I wish there could have been more but I cannot tell people what to say," he said, but quickly dismissed notions that this was an indication that he was alone in trying to fight corruption.

"I am not alone. I have my friends."