

# Pak Lah shows he is Prime Minister of all Malaysians

## ANALYSIS BY JOCELINE TAN

AFTER all the highly-charged debates, there was an expectant air in the Dewan Merdeka when Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stepped up to the rostrum on the final day of the Umno general assembly.

His baju Melayu was of a fiery scarlet but his demeanour was calm and his words an antidote to the heat and fury of the past days.

This gathering of the Umno faithful had been one of the most stirring in years, where communal values and fears were expressed with almost little reserve.

The Prime Minister could have drawn the populist card and played to the Malay gallery but his winding-up speech was a reminder to all that although he stood before a hall filled with Malays, he was also the Prime Minister of all Malaysians.

As such, it is likely that not everybody in the hall warmed up to his

speech. After so much discussion on the state of their economic and social situation, the delegates expected their president to directly address their concerns.

But Abdullah's response showed he had the resolve to take the multi-ethnic path in the face of pressure to take the Malay line. And his off-the-cuff delivery had a touching sincerity to it.

This year's general assembly had taken place in the midst of rather unsettling times for the Malays.

They are trying to cope with the fact that after decades of affirmative policies, the economic targets of the NEP are still a far-off dream. At the same time they feel that their identity as Muslims and Malays is being questioned by non-Malays.

Also, continuous talk of meritocracy and being competitive seems to have unnerved many Malays rather than spurred them on.

To top it all, their icon of many years, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had unleashed a barrage of criticism

against their president.

The Malay sense of security and magnanimity that was so evident in the pre-Asian currency crisis years of the 1990s was sorely missing.

Back then, their economic stake was on a steady rise and their prestige as Malays and Malaysians a source of pride, thanks in no small way to their then president stamping his mark on the world stage.

Umno members' sentiments that they are under siege may also have to do with the changes they are going through under a new leader who is trying to inculcate his own ideas and style of doing things.

All these misgivings erupted in some manner or other during the assembly.

Pictures of Umno Youth chief Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein showed him in some of the fiercest poses ever - fist raised high, mouth wide open with fire in his eyes.

Yet, in person, he is urbane, well-spoken, reasonable and more com-

fortable with a mobile phone in his hand than a sharp keris.

But the Youth wing is the vanguard of the Malay Agenda and its assembly on Tuesday was the most hot-blooded of all the three wings, with lots of clenched fists and high-decibel talk about *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy).

Still the Youth wing has to remember that it is the repository of future national leadership and not go over the edge.

Said supreme council member Datuk Shahrir Samad: "I don't think we were being racist or extreme or ultra. Of course, we discuss Malay issues from the Malay perspective and when we do that, we have to compare ourselves to the non-Malay situation."

And as far as Umno members are concerned, Malay issues are national issues.

The leadership will have to take stock of not only the things said but also the sentiments expressed.

But as Shahrir pointed out, it was evident from the debates that delegates were in agreement with the president's emphasis on human capital and that Umno has to focus on it if they want to catch up with the rest.

For those looking on, it was also the way the delegates seemed to blame others for their problems and setbacks.

It is true that external factors are a major cause of why Malays still need affirmative policies but they should also look more critically within their own community to see what has gone wrong and what can be done.

On a more personal level, the assembly has been a reaffirmation of unity and support for Abdullah.

"It shows that party members are not going to allow themselves to be forced by one person to make a choice. Pak Lah is very comfortable within the party," said Shahrir.

One might even say that Abdullah has entered a new chapter.