

A time to dose ranks

WITH MAHATHIR ABSENT, ASSEMBLY SET TO BE MUNDANE AFFAIR

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THE Umno general assembly this year promises to be - as in all non-election years - as exciting as watching a *padi* plant grow. Most observers and many delegates to the assembly think it is going to be a very mundane affair.

In fact that is also the hope of the party "leadership", a popular euphemism for the supreme council but more directly president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Razak or just Abdullah alone.

Others are saying how can that be when former premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had been openly criticising Abdullah for six months and their tiff had dominated much of Umno's affairs and activities since then.

While Umno has been doing everything possible - through numerous briefings - to ensure that the public row does not overflow into the assembly, there is a sense of unease that it may just do so.

In this sense, officials say the party may have been lucky that Mahathir was not selected as a delegate to the assembly. Some even see the party as second time lucky that the former president is now hospitalised for a minor heart ailment as he is now unable to attend after announcing that he was going to do so as a guest.

Observers and some delegates who have arrived early are discussing this unease and the latest developments regarding Mahathir. They are busy at the various watering holes (euphemism for coffee, houses) - "catching up on the latest" and involved in "discussing and debating" of "this and that" and what "who and who" are doing in the party.

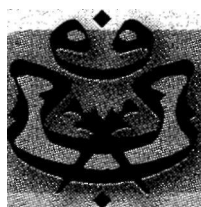
Much of these sessions also speculate on the decision for the assembly to be brought forward by a day.

In the "old days" - euphemism for pre-Mahathir era - Umno Youth and Wanita Umno had their assemblies on Thursday and the three-day AGM of the main party followed the next day.

According to an earlier schedule, the deputy president is to address the joint opening of the Youth, Wanita and Puteri assemblies - a tradition - tomorrow evening with their separate assemblies following on Wednesday. But Najib is now addressing them this evening.

One of the major causes of unease is the fear that some delegates, who had been selected to be spokesmen for the various subjects during the assembly, may just decide to veer away from their briefs and speak on some of the concerns of the members.

The fear is also that this may result



Umno General Assembly November 13-17

TODAY

3pm: Briefing by Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to Wanita, Youth and Puteri executive council members and divisional committee members
8pm: Joint opening of with, Wanita and Puteri meetings by deputy president Datuk Seri Najib F

TOMORROW (Nov 14)

» **Youth chief Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, Wanita chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Puteri chief Datuk Noraini Ahmad deliver policy speeches.**
» **Youth: Debate on Hishammuddin's address**
» **Wanita: Debate on Rafidah's address**

Meter 2,554 delegates to the assembly comprise 49 supreme council members, 30 representatives from Youth, Wanita and Puteri and 2,475 delegates from 191 divisions representing more than three million members.

in a free-for-all between those who have different interpretation of what the "real issues" facing the party are. This concern has not gone away despite the numerous briefings the delegates have received from their division and state leaders.

The delegates have already been reminded countless times by Abdullah, Najib, the vice-presidents and others to speak only on "real issues" - the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the various development strategies, the Malay Agenda, Malay equity - instead of bringing up subjects that can disunite the party.

Some of those at the coffeeshop gossip sessions do not see eye-to-eye on the leadership's idea of "real issues". They see that other issues have cropped up since Abdullah took over as prime minister three years ago.

Abdullah himself is not unaware of the popular discussions about him, his administration and his family since since Mahathir began highlighting them.

Some of these delegates wish the assembly or at least the debate on the presidential address could become a true evaluation of the performance of

the leadership but knowing that this is unlikely to be, they and many party members are quite happy to allow Mahathir to articulate their concerns.

Mahathir's presence, even as a guest, would embolden them, and a source of discomfort to Abdullah. But Mahathir could also be a target for ridicule in the assembly and subjected to a booing reception outside.

Thus, the need for Mahathir to be hospitalised further at the National Heart Institute after he was admitted on Thursday is a boon not only to Umno but also to Abdullah and Mahathir.

The message that has gone out to delegates and members is "*hormat Tun dan sokong president parti*" (respect the Tun and support the party president).

With that out of the way, the party can now breathe easy and focus on all the subjects under "Malay Agenda": the general election and the need to stay united following the assaults by "others" or "*pihak yang tertentu*" (certain parties) on the position of Islam and Article 11 of the national charter, the Malay privileges and Malay equity.

The message that the party hopes to deliver to those at the assembly and to all its members throughout the country is that Malays are under siege, and "let's stay united so that we will achieve a massive victory again in the coming general election".

The assembly would probably prorogue on Friday with cheers of "*Hidup Melayu*", the waving of *Sang Saka Bangsa* and the brandishing of the keris *Panca Warisan*.

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