

# Umno unplugged aside, what matters most is Malaysia

SO we are now debating the debate.

After the fire and brimstone, the invocation of supremacy and rights, and the cries of nationalism and communalism, some people are taking a hard, long look at ethnic identity in Malaysia today.

Some have expressed their concern over the debates that took place at the annual congress of Malaysia's biggest and most significant political party.

Some have said that the speeches were full of threats and hatred. Others have even lodged police reports against supposedly seditious interventions, including against the author for my winding-up speech at the Youth assembly.

Undeniably, there was some latent tension within Umno and on the Malay ground this year.

There was the "memorandum" to the Prime Minister by non-Muslim ministers. There was the polemic over Malay economic achievements in Penang. There was the Asli report about Bumiputera corporate equity ownership.

And there was a general momentum that started at last year's general assembly when the party agreed to pursue a more formalised *Agenda Melayu* by refocusing on the original spirit and intent of the New Economic Policy.

These issues, no doubt, channelled into a crescendo of powerful oratory, one or two of which crossed the boundaries of ethno-nationalism into jingoistic chest thumping.

This has led to alarm bells of communal tension ringing, with many understandably concerned about the future of race relations in Malaysia.

This year's assembly was my eighth. I am a keen delegate to the assembly and I try to sit through as many speeches as possible, taking copious notes in every session I attend.

In the aftermath of this year's assembly, I looked back at past meetings and saw nothing unusual about what took place.

Sure there were some sensitive issues being debated in the media in the run-up to the assembly, but there is always a set of communal concerns that get strategic publicity before each Umno meet, and for that matter before any annual meeting of the communal parties in Barisan Nasional.

This is to be expected because the *raison d'être* for individual communal parties like Umno, MCA and MIC is our "struggle" or *perjuangan* for



OUT OF THE CAGE

By Khairy Jamaluddin

our respective communities.

When I checked with several other more experienced Umno figures if my impression that the debate this year was no more, no less emotionally charged than those in the past, they agreed based on historical perspectives that far outstretch mine.

To them, there was nothing new with the rhetoric. It had all been said and articulated before, many times over. The only difference this time around was that the proceedings were carried "live" on television.

For the first time ever, Malaysians who previously only read reports in newspapers or saw excerpts on the news were exposed to Umno uncut, unplugged.

For the first time, they followed every syllable, every word and every gesticulation from each speaker.

The ensuing "culture shock" is understandable. Never before have those on the outside had the opportunity to see what only delegates, observers and official media have seen in the past.

But what must be understood here is that, as far as Umno members are concerned, there was nothing unusual about this year's debate.

Now that logically begs the question: If the rhetoric in Umno has always been like this, then shouldn't non-Malays be even more worried since this is the norm?

The answer is an emphatic "no".

For those who are peddling around the spin that the recent Umno assembly is testament to intolerance and even racism, it needs to be pointed out that while there is nothing extraordinary about this year's congress and that similar sentiments have been raised in the past, these feelings have never compromised the ultimate manifestation of governance in this country through BN's power-sharing formula.

Simply put, no matter how emotionally charged the assemblies have been in the past — whether Umno, MCA or MIC meetings — at the end of the day, the government that all the BN component parties represent has never abandoned the moderate cen-

tre in our political spectrum.

So the fact that this happens year after year, and yet we still ultimately manage to deal with all our differences in measured and considerate ways, speaks volumes for all the parties in BN and the trust that exists among us.

Failure to understand this and to conclude that "communalism" as practised by BN's main parties is outdated naively denies the political reality on the ground.

To understand the Umno assemblies, one must understand the political and cultural milieu of the Malays.

One must understand there are matters that are considered sacrosanct, such as Malay rights and the status of Islam as the official religion of the Federation.

The general assembly has always been a platform for Umno to remind ourselves, and others, that these matters must never be questioned or compromised because it relates to the very reason why Umno was founded and forms the essence of the Malay position in the "social contract".

Seen from this perspective, what we say during our meetings is as much a reminder to ourselves that these principles must be defended as much as it is a reminder to others that we still hold these matters sacred.

The assembly provides a crucial avenue for the grassroots to vent their frustrations about what they perceive as attempts to undermine, question or even revoke these hallowed principles.

Although there was nothing new in the intensity of the rhetoric this year, it took place within the context of a more open political climate.

The prime minister's decision to give more room for discourse and debate has resulted in a sense of anxiety, that issues Malays have considered off-limits to everyone else are suddenly considered fair game.

The delegates' speeches were part of a process of accepting the realities of the new openness by saying: "Yes, by all means, let us embrace the political space that the leadership wants to create as part of a maturing democracy, but let us remind everyone — ourselves included — that there are limits to freedom."

"And for the Malays, the limit draws a protective line around religion and race."

That was the essence of the debate. If we sift through the heroics, the storm and thunder, it was a safety valve that needed to be released.

There was too much pent-up frustration and latent tension on the Malay ground. All the issues that preceded the assembly resulted in a community that was akin to a highly coiled spring, ready to unwind with unstoppable force.

But the Umno general assembly proved once again that it is a crucial gathering that allows for the community to air their concerns, vent their frustrations and, yes, even unleash their anger.

But as with any meeting — political or otherwise — it is always the first word and the last that frames the

event for posterity.

The prime minister's presidential address that opened the assembly, his winding-up speech at the end and the resolutions that mirrored his speeches are the ultimate reflection of the assembly.

That he chose to remind the delegates that Umno must stay the course with its coalition partners, that we need to hold fast to consensus and compromise, that no one community walks away from the negotiating table with everything nor is left with nothing, that our approach of fighting for our race and our religion yet respecting what other communities pursue is not mutually exclusive or inconsistent, that the president of Umno is also the prime minister of all Malaysians, showed that he was in control and that the situation is under control.

After a few days of charged rhetoric it would have been too easy for the final word to merely echo the sentiments on the ground.

But that is not leadership. Leadership is when you let everything that needs to be said, out in the open, but have the credibility, moral authority and courage to bring everyone back to the centre, to smooth the frayed edges, to soothe raw nerves and to turn charged emotions into a positive energy with a purpose not just for Malays but for Malaysians.

That is the leadership that we saw from the president of Umno and that must be the enduring image of the general assembly.

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