

Pak Lah asserts he stands for all

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Comment by **Zainon Ahmad**

IN THE end Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi exerted his leadership and lived up to the assertion he made early in his administration that he is the prime minister of all Malaysians. Indeed, Aristotle was right when he said: "If men think that a ruler is religious and has reverence for the Gods, they are less afraid of suffering at his hands."

But for a while Malaysians, especially non-Malays, thought he would be swept irretrievably away into the maelstrom of jingoism of this year's Umno General Assembly and forget his pledge that his administration would be fair to everyone.

Malaysians have grown used to the sentiments and threats expressed at the annual assemblies and consider them part of the harmless puffery Umno members indulge in to purge themselves of their pent up anger. But the just-concluded assembly was somehow

different and was not the usual steam-letting Malaysians were used to, as alluded to by party secretary general Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad. Somehow the mood - palpable even before the Youth, Wanita and Puteri wings began their meetings on Tuesday - was different.

The language the delegates used was different and the approaches they used, too, were different.

Despite earlier warnings against racial slants in their speeches, racist remarks were made and the Chinese seemed to be openly identified as the target of some delegates' anger.

There were even exhortations to violence. One delegate said it was time the kris *Panca Warisan* be used instead of just being brandished about, while another called for the weapon to be "bathed in blood". When discussion centred on Islam, one delegate even called for apostates to be beheaded.

Such was the

demonstration of raw passion that those outside the Dewan Merdeka were concerned and speculated on what could possibly follow, now that there was not only the Malay Agenda but also the Islamic Agenda. Other BN component parties

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- Abdullah

were not amused either.

Abdullah called an unscheduled press conference at the end of the second day of proceedings and explained that the high-octane debate on such issues as the New Economic Policy, Malay rights and Islam was a reaction to the recent public debates on the subjects.

He said now that the delegates had "spoken their minds", he was sure they

"would not harp on them anymore". He said there can be debates, but that "we must always be aware of the limitations".

It was an attempt to soothe, and a recognition of the fact that maybe, things had gone a bit too far.

The fact that he alluded to the stock market before he began his closing remarks on Friday also said something.

Much of it and much of what he said at

the press conference after the closing was a mere reiteration of what he said at Thursday's press conference, that Umno cannot ignore the rights of the other races.

The speech and the last press conference made the appropriate conciliatory observations reassuring others that they need not be too concerned, while at the same time not belittling what the delegates had said.

"Umno has the right to discuss and debate issues relating to the Malays, but as leaders of all Malaysians we must never forget what is needed by all the races in the country," Abdullah said, among other things.

Even among some Umno delegates and observers, the feeling was that "things went a bit too far" and could have been avoided.

Others asked what else they could do when they could not touch on Abdullah and his administration and his row with former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"This year being a non-election year, the focus is on the debates, and so it had to be made interesting. With some of the topics beyond discussion, we have to focus on emotional issues to get attention," a delegate said.

But the course of events, whether carefully choreographed or managed, worked in Abdullah's favour. By weaving into his opening speech, some of the senti-

ments of party members, which set the tone for some of the debates, he is now the undisputed leader of Umno.

And by speaking out against religious intolerance and insisting on the rule of law and meritocracy, while at the same time insisting that the rights of others must be protected, he is now also the leader the other races can count and depend on.

Clearly, the assembly - coming on the heel of the public spat between him and his predecessor and the critical comments made about his administration - is about the endorsement of his leadership.

And the assembly and those outside wholly gave him that.

This was clear even from the start when the song welcoming the Prophet Mohammad to Medina was sung as Abdullah walked into the hall and the Quranic verses that spoke out against false leaders was recited before the commencement of the assembly.