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Cold body language between top two

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The mood and response of the Umno delegates to Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's opening speech left no doubt about their support for the Umno president.

EVERYONE noticed the unfamiliar seating arrangement on the Umno general assembly stage this year.

Umno president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and his deputy Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin were no longer placed side-by-side on stage.

They were still seated adjacent to each other but at separate tables where they were flanked by the other party leaders.

Whoever designed the new seating arrangement understands the politics swirling around the top two and he also knows a thing or two about the politics of seating.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife were also moved from his usual central spot on the floor to slightly off centre where he could look up directly to Muhyiddin.

It was all so subtle, yet so indicative of what was happening in Umno, and the body language between the top two was quite cold.

Some thought Najib would make some sort of gesture towards Muhyiddin after his speech.

But after soaking in the rowdy standing ovation, he immediately gathered his things and made his way to the rear of the stage where he was mobbed by the rest of the supreme council members or what KRA Group political analyst Amir Fareed Abdul Rahim called the "president's men".

Any sort of reconciliation was

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wishful thinking after Najib's speech. This year, he did not make a policy speech.

Instead, it was pure politics from the word go.

It was also one of those rare occasions where he spoke more as the president of Umno than as the Prime Minister.

Najib has been slammed, hammered and pounded by Dr Mahathir for more than a year and yesterday was his turn to hit back.

The bulk of his speech was directed at the elder man.

He cut to the chase and rebutted issues raised by the former premier which was no small thing given that Dr Mahathir was sitting there on the front row.

Dr Mahathir's claim that Malaysia is a "failed state" and a "beggar state" has really got Najib's goat and he expanded on his economic track record since becoming Prime Minister.

He was basically saying that the elder man's accusations were a bunch of lies.

There is also a reason why he has brought it up several times - he is



Face to face: Najib being greeted by Muhyiddin (right) and vice president Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi upon his arrival at the 69th Umno general assembly.

telling the party that Dr Mahathir not only wants to destroy him but that he is damaging the country.

He knew it would touch a raw nerve with the nationalist-minded Umno crowd.

It was couched in a typically Malay way - critical but within a respectful limit.

His treatment of his fallout with Muhyiddin was classic.

He did not accuse his deputy or spell out how his deputy had undermined him but he reproduced on the big screen the Umno constitution which specifies that a

deputy president is to assist the duties of the president.

It was a fiery speech and it resonated with the Umno delegates in a way that few had ever seen.

They cheered and clapped and called out comments throughout the speech.

In fact, 15 minutes into the speech, Najib received a noisy standing ovation when he declared he is not caving in and is determined to remain the president.

Only three notable persons remained in their seats - Dr Mahathir, Muhyiddin and Shafie.

"He wanted to set the record straight. He is tired of people attacking him and he is lashing back.

"No one is going to say Najib is soft after this," said Amir.

More than that, the mood and the response of the delegates drove home the message that Najib has overwhelming support in the party.

"It's signed and sealed, the delegates want to stand by the president," said Kapar division chief Datuk Faizal Abdullah.

Faizal felt sad that Dr Mahathir had to sit there and listen to the shouting and the remarks made by the delegates.

People were shouting things like *rehat* (take a rest) and *jaga cucu* (look after your grandchildren).

Faizal said delegates would have been even more upset had they known that the night before the general assembly, Dr Mahathir had made a last ditch attempt to discredit Najib when he accused Najib of trying to bribe him.

He claimed Najib used to go and see him and ask what he wanted.

"It should not have come to this but people are tired of the attacks. It was their way of saying, enough is enough," said Faizal.

For many of them, Dr Mahathir has gone too far and he had gone on for too long.

And the message was hammered home at the general assembly.