

Crucial test at Umno assembly

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REASSURING VOTERS: The backbone of Barisan Nasional is now a mature and transformed party of moderation

IT is that time of the year again when Umno holds its annual meeting, and the overriding aim will be consolidation of the party and strengthening of strategies to face the most challenging national polls the party has ever faced.

As the country's political spotlight pans on the Putra World Trade Centre, where the assembly will take place next week, observers expect delegates to show Umno's sincerity in addressing party and national concerns, both being key factors to the party's relevance in modern-day politics.

The assembly is the best venue and the last chance for Umno to assure some 11 million discerning Malaysian voters that it is living up to its rhetoric of being a mature and transformed party of moderation, after the electoral losses suffered by Barisan Nasional in 2008.

It has to reassure voters that it remains committed to the bedrock of Malay politics and reviving the selfless spirit of its founding fathers in 1946 -- the spirit of inclusiveness towards other races.

This would indicate that it has learned from the lessons of the 2008 polls, and that the claims of support returning to the party are not merely a figment of the imagination.

As at the last assembly, the dominant issue will be the next general election. The focus will be on the state of preparedness of Umno's election machinery and, of course, the chances of the party scoring a bigger victory and ensuring the ruling BN, which it leads, retains power. For Umno to work towards these goals, it should revisit events that transpired during last year's assembly and see how Umno members have instituted changes.

The two important messages that Datuk Seri Najib Razak sent last year were crystal clear.

FIRST, the Umno president wanted Umno's three million-plus members to get ready to march to the battle lines; and,

SECOND, he wanted the rival factions in the party to unite and work as a team to register a bigger win in the coming general election.

Full preparedness is necessary to help BN regain its two-thirds majority, win back the states under the opposition and increase the number of popular votes for BN.

But there are still nagging questions as to the actual state of preparedness of Umno on the ground, despite the party's rank and file responding in rather convincing tones that they are ready to battle their political opponents.

The reality is that members in many party divisions have yet to close ranks or feel fully committed to discarding politics of self-interest. Many are more interested in becoming candidates or to contest for positions in the party, putting loyalty to, and strengthening of, the election machinery lower down on their list of priorities.

It has also been a year since more than 5,000 delegates made pledges on their loyalty and allegiance to the party. The pledges were a reminder to Umno members to get their priorities right ahead of an anticipated tightly-fought national polls.

Umno created history of sorts with the pledges, one made by its members during the presidential briefing in front of the party president and another at the end of the assembly, led by deputy president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. Everyone, from the delegates and the who's who in the party, felt good about that.

The feeling trickled down and similar pledges were subsequently made by smaller groups of party members in different parts of the country.

And as the stage is again set for another gathering of Umno's faithful, political players and watchers are asking whether members have the political courage to keep their promise to the party leadership.

Only self-assessment will tell if those who had made the pledges -- which spelled out their commitment to stand united and work hard for the party as well as to remain loyal to the party and its leaders and ensure the victory of Umno and BN election candidates -- are keeping their word not to engage in activities deemed detrimental to its chances of winning back lost support.

Yet, many are asking why, less than a week ago, Umno information chief Datuk Ahmad Maslan had proposed that party members renew their pledge of loyalty at the upcoming assembly. Ahmad reiterated, as reported by national news agency Bernama, that it was sabotage by party members that had caused the defeat of Umno candidates in the last general election.

Was he indicating that there is no decrease in instances of sabotage despite repeated assurances by party members that they would not sabotage the party?

Umno insiders said Najib was certain to touch on this thorny issue of loyalty to the party during his "Taklimat Presiden", the closed-door gathering that serves as a preamble to Umno general assemblies, and which also usually sets the tone for the proceedings.

The party president is concerned about the tendency of party members to resort to sabotage should they or their supporters not make it into BN's candidates' list.

In winding up last year's assembly, Najib had said the defeat of many Umno candidates in the 2008 election was because of betrayal by some party members. He reminded members against resorting to such despicable acts during meetings with Umno leaders and their grassroots supporters.

Umno simply does not want to see a repeat of what happened in 2008. The general election is nowhere in sight, but Umno's general assembly, no doubt, will attract extraordinary attention as voters would like to see whether Umno has improved and perfected its struggles to suit the electorate's current demands.

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