

Mahathir still as charismatic

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ADORED FIGURE: Mukhriz kissing his father's hand when the former Umno president took his seat at the assembly hall at the PWTC yesterday. Dr Mahathir and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah were special guests at the assembly.

AT LAST year's Umno general assembly - Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's final appearance as party president - he was mobbed by members everywhere he went during the three-day meeting.

It was no different yesterday, except he attended the assembly's opening as an invited guest together with his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

On his arrival at PWTC at 8.20am, he was immediately surrounded by a big crowd and one man was seen kissing him on both cheeks.

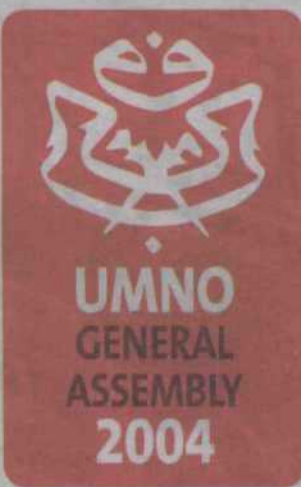
As he and Dr Siti Hasmah sat in the front row allocated for special guests, members and guests lined up to shake hands and greet him.

His sons Datuk Mokhzani and Datuk Mukhriz, who garnered the top spot for an Umno Youth exco seat kissed his hands and cheeks before the ceremony began.

As the master-of-ceremony announced his name, Dr Mahathir was given a standing ovation by those present at Merdeka Hall.

After the opening ceremony, more party supporters crowded around him and pushed each other in order to have the opportunity to shake or kiss his hand. They also took photographs with him at every given opportunity after the opening.

And the relaxed and gracious former premier stopped for them while they snapped away



with their cameras.

He was not spared by the press, both local and foreign, who stopped him four times to interview him from the time he walked from the tea break area to his car at the main entrance of the Putra World Trade Centre, where the assembly is going on.

They mobbed him twice inside the building and twice again outside.

Questions directed to him ranged from his feelings about attending the opening as former Umno president to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Dr Mahathir said that attending the opening as a guest this year was a relaxing experience.

"It was very relaxing I must say. I don't have to deliver any speeches. I can just listen and then go and eat," he said.

He also said that he was

grateful that the people had chosen his son, Mukhriz as an Umno Youth exco member.

"I am grateful that people have chosen him but not because of me. I didn't want him to contest when I was prime minister as I was afraid that people will say that he is chosen because of me.

"It is his own personal conviction and it is up to the delegates whether they want to vote for him or not," he said when asked about Mukhriz receiving the highest number of votes for the post.

When asked to comment on the three Umno movements - Wanita, Youth and Puteri - being unanimous in rejecting the return of 'traitors' to the party, Dr Mahathir said that a party member must never betray the party.

The movements' decision showed support for the supreme council's stand last week, which shut the door on any possible future return of Anwar to the party.

"You mustn't because you have done something wrong. If you do something against the party, that is wrong.

"I was thrown out of the party before. I came back because I didn't do any harm to the party," he added.

Dr Siti Hasmah, meanwhile said that she was happy to be with the rest who attended the opening.

"I am happy with the rest as an ordinary Umno guest. It is nice to be back," she said.