

'Report card' on PM to dominate assembly

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ONE thing there'll be plenty of at this year's Umno assembly is the hot-button topic.

There have been many far-reaching issues and controversies over the last 12 months. Each can decide the place this year's party meeting will occupy in the history books.

Some believe the assembly will be remembered as the rallying point to kick-start preparations for a snap general election next year, though polls aren't due until July 2009.

Others suspect it will provide the stage for a historic showdown: a national party forum where the whole Umno machinery finally seizes the opportunity to square-off on Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's attacks on Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Views are mixed on how things will unfold. But party figures and observers note what will make the coming assembly special: it takes place amid Abdullah's third anniversary as Prime Minister early this month.

That, and the fact that the assembly will be held against the mounting and increasingly scathing criticisms by Dr Mahathir.

Bottom line: expect two key themes to emerge at the 2006 Umno general assembly.

First, an "evaluation" by Umno of Abdullah's performance so far. It will be important for the government, now heading into the second half of its five-year mandate.

Second is a conscious effort to show that Umno is not going to be eclipsed by the Dr Mahathir controversy. Succeeding here means giving room to the party and Abdullah to move on.

"If I were to summarise the coming Umno meeting in one sentence, I'd say that it's the one where Umno decides on the content of a 'report card' for Abdullah, the individual who leads both the party and the government," says political analyst Professor Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin.

Shamsul, who heads Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation, expects some tough questions from delegates, mainly over some weaknesses in the implementation of the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

The five-year national development plan is Abdullah's first as prime minister. Much of Umno's fortunes in the next general election hinges on a successful rollout.

"He'll have to listen to what his delegates are going to tell him on what they think he needs to do," says Shamsul.

"That's one interesting aspect of the assembly many will be looking out for," says Terengganu Umno information chief Ahmad Shabery Cheek.

"It will be about him listening to the grassroots and what they have to say and responding. It'll be interesting to see how this will unfold," says Shabery.

"This, to me, is going to be about the government's delivery system," says supreme council member Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

"The 9MP was only launched early this year. It takes time for the effect to be felt on the ground, but there's a sense that the implementation must be speeded up," adds Zahid.

"The focus (of the assembly) will be on government-driven themes, things like the economy and the focus on agriculture and human capital development," says party information chief Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

"Pak Lah will be renewing emphasis on some sectors which, perhaps, has been lag-

ging."

Umno is repeatedly highlighting how important it is to make sure the 9MP is effectively rolled out.

That, and a recent decision to delay the party's next polls — due next year — by a maximum of 18 months, got some wondering whether an early general election is coming, perhaps some time next year.

Could this be the last Umno assembly before the next general election?

"I do not believe that Pak Lah will seek a general election next year," says fellow council member Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz, arguing that there is no urgency for a snap poll.

Shabery notes the only time a general election was held three years into a term was in 1978.

Pas' short-lived membership in the Barisan Nasional had ended the year before.

A Kelantan state election held soon after the breakup proved so disastrous to Pas that Umno decided to hold a snap general election the following year to maximise the momentum, he says.

"The situation was special. I don't see current conditions coming anywhere close," says Shabery.

But this year's assembly will not be a timid affair.

Most of the heat will be over what many in the rank and file

see as unacceptable attempts to question the special privileges of the Bumiputera and the position of Islam.

"Watch how state Umno leaders deal with the issues," says Shamsul.

"They will provide cues to the stand state delegates in the assembly will take. There will be 'fireworks'," he adds.

State Umno committees develop their stand on such issues at state party conventions often held close to a party assembly.

But the narrow gap between the end of the fasting month and the assembly — three weeks — means most state Umno will probably not be able to hold their conventions in time.

Some, like Terengganu Umno, got around this by holding their convention early, in June. That leaves the notable exception of Johor Umno, which is having its two-day convention from today.

State Umno chief and Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman is expected to voice strong objections over certain developments.

They include what is seen as a continued push by some to set up an Interfaith Commission, and unacceptable "attempts" by others to allegedly "re-interpret" the Constitution on matters relating to Malay rights.

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Assembly unlikely to 'overdo' Dr Mahathir issue

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Such sentiments run deep not just in Johor.

Kedah's Pokok Sena division secretary Ramli Mohd Yunus says that while it doesn't look likely that Kedah Umno will hold a convention this year, "but if it did, then these recent controversial issues about race and religion would definitely take centre stage".

Strong words by delegates on the position of Islam and Malay rights are not uncommon at an Umno assembly. What could make the difference this time around is the positioning of the arguments.

"Rather than just citing examples why many Malays still need help because they are still lagging, I believe some of the arguments will go be-

yond," says Shamsul.

He expects a defence of the affirmative action policies to be positioned as part of a mutually agreed Constitution and social contract.

There will be reminders of the reasons why maintaining that contract is seen as important by Umno.

Shabery hopes that the debate on Malay privileges, in particular, will generate light, not just heat.

"People expect that if we are to defend Bumiputera rights when we reply to the ASLI (Asian Strategic Leadership Institute) report, or to comments by Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore Minister Mentor), then we should have more sophisticated arguments, or else people will just get turned off."

Another source of potential heat will be in how the assembly deals

with the Dr Mahathir issue.

Again, Shamsul suggests looking at the positions the state Umno chiefs have expressed, or are about to.

It will be a signal of how strong the overall stand will be at the assembly.

An example is Kedah Umno chief Datuk Mahdzir Khalid, who early this week hit out at Dr Mahathir for going "overboard" as an Umno member by continuing to criticise Abdullah.

"It was a stand our MB had to be vocal before the assembly. If not, the Kedah delegates would still be *mera-ba dalam gelap* (groping in the dark) about the issue," says Pokok Sena division's Ramli.

"Having stated the official state Umno position, Kedah delegates can go to the assembly knowing what our official stand is."

A clearer sign will be how Abdullah

responds to the criticisms in his opening speech at the assembly. That will set the tone of the debates to follow. But there is also a feeling that Umno does not want to "overdo" the Dr Mahathir issue at the assembly.

"I believe Umno will deal with his criticisms without giving it overdue importance. The Dr Mahathir issue is one which I think the party will not want to make as central at the assembly as perhaps Dr Mahathir himself wants it to be," says Shamsul.

But Nazri does not feel there is a danger that it would be an issue that would overshadow the assembly even if left unchecked.

"The assembly can be seen as the first full opportunity where the whole party machinery can get together in one forum to collectively voice their stand," he says.

Ahmad Zahid, on the other hand, says some delegates "can't wait" for the chance to speak out in the face of the criticisms. "But my advice is that we should not be petty about it. We are the ones with the power to decide, so our focus should be on maintaining our confidence in Pak Lah."

It is, notes Shabery, what ultimately makes the assembly unique.

"This is the first time in Umno's history that we are holding an assembly led by a leader who has been disowned by the predecessor who chose him," he says.

The coming assembly, adds Shabery, will therefore be the one where the whole party machinery gets together to decide exactly where it stands.

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