

Abdullah will have his plate full

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TO the general public, both in Malaysia and elsewhere, the Abdullah-Mahathir rift and its ramifications would be the big issue in the forthcoming Umno General Assembly.

All eyes and ears of the members from every Umno division would be focused on Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's opening and closing speeches in the General Assembly that starts on Nov 13.

He would be expected to reply to every criticism of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. If he does not, many of those division representatives would be disappointed and his "elegant silence" could come to be viewed as an avoidance.

Bread-and-butter economic issues as well as other related ones would be on the top of the agenda of many of the Umno division representatives, many of whom belong to the suffering "Contractor F" group.

One of the main complaints would be the slowness in the implementation of the projects of the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) from which

COMMENT

By **Shamsul Amri Baharuddin**

these F-class contractors could benefit. As it is, the rumblings at the district level is that many of the 9MP projects have not trickled down to the grassroots.

Related to the economic issue are matters relating to the Malay agenda (read economic agenda).

Support for the continuation of NEP-type policies in the 9MP would be praised, but the delivery has been too slow for the liking of Umno members at the grassroots.

Many others would definitely raise questions on the policy of teaching mathematics and science subjects in English at government schools.

The main concern is that many Malay students do not seem to have a good command of English, and their knowledge in mathematics

and science has also suffered.

The fear that the Malay language could be reduced to becoming the third language in the country, as a result of this policy, has begun to become the topic of concern for Umno division members.

Why? Because it has begun to affect school leavers, especially Malay school leavers, who are already perceived as being not good enough to find work and survive in the public sector.

Related to this would be the issue of meritocracy for entry into public universities, which is increasingly perceived as hindering long-term Malay educational and economic interests.

Many Malays have complained that their children have been deprived from entering programmes that could guarantee lucrative jobs and a comfortable lifestyle.

Religion has been a staple subject of discussions and speeches in all the Umno General Assembly since the early 1980s when the Umno-led Barisan Nasional introduced its massive "Islamisation Programmes".

But again, the economic twist will be more pronounced, such as the role of Tabung Haji and why it has been affected by scandals and poor financial management implicating some of its so-called "pious" leaders.

The increase in social problems in the country, such as crime, snatch thefts, drug trafficking and others would also be raised and would be viewed from a "moral" perspective, especially, an Islamic one.

Some will also be raising the role of Malaysia in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and why it has failed to do anything to help those attacked by the Israelis in Lebanon.

This topic is popular because it is so easy to whip up emotion when it comes to any discussion on Israel and the Middle East.

The promise by Abdullah to reduce corruption and have a more transparent government as well as the role of the National Institute of Integrity would be queried by some of the Umno division representatives.

In this context, the "Istana Zakaria" controversy would also be

raised because of the way the whole issue unfolded in the wake of advice by various senior leaders that Klang municipal councillor Zakaria Mat Deros should not take up his appointment as councillor.

Other Umno divisions perhaps would take a cue from Zakaria's initial defiance, seen by many as a reflection of the powerful grassroots role of Umno divisions and their leaders in national Umno politics.

All said and done, there's little doubt that Abdullah will have his plate full at this general assembly.

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