

Low-key approach to Dr M issue

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■ News Analysis by Abdul Razak Ahmad

THE Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad issue was a no-show yesterday.

Umno's three wings yesterday mostly kept direct references of the former leader off-limits in their debates. The handful who touched on Dr Mahathir's attacks on Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi just made passing references, leading to a growing belief that the issue may not gain traction as some were expecting.

Speakers debating motions at the concurrent sessions of Umno Youth, Wanita Umno, and Puteri Umno kept their focus on topics dear to their hearts: the Malay Agenda and related issues, ranging from objections to the proposed inter-Faith Council, meritocracy, to the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English.

On the Dr Mahathir issue, speak-

ers opted for a low-key approach. Federal Territory Wanita Umno representative Hairunnisa Bivee Ismail spoke on how the Umno leadership "should not be disturbed".

"We must ensure our leaders feel comfortable to work and make a success of the Malay Agenda. Don't mind what others say. Don't worry, Pak Lah," she said.

Johor Puteri Umno's Faradila Awang chose an "indirect" route. She urged all parties including the media not to "over-sensationalise" issues that range from celebrity gossip to the Dr Mahathir controversy.

None of the movement's heads — Umno Youth's Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, Wanita Umno's Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, and Puteri Umno's Datuk Noraini Ahmad — referred to Dr Mahathir by name in their opening speeches.

Rafidah, in her speech, however,

presented the clearest indication of unhappiness towards Dr Mahathir over his criticisms of Abdullah's administration, though she did not name the former leader.

Party insiders said the lack of emphasis on Dr Mahathir was expected.

Speakers had been prepared on how to tackle the many subjects. Caution was a key word when it came to Dr Mahathir's criticisms.

An Umno Youth official explained Hishammuddin's priorities on how to deal with the hot topic. First was to maintain party interests, and second, his belief that party elders must be respected.

"There are differences of opinions among Umno Youth members on how to deal with the Dr Mahathir issue. Allowing an attack on Dr Mahathir could have created a backlash by those who wanted to speak about him," said the official.

Rafidah, after briefing her move-

ment's delegates on Monday, said she left open the arena to her delegates, including on the Dr Mahathir issue, so long as they kept within party decorum.

The biggest cue came from the party president himself. Delegates who attended Abdullah's closed-door pre-assembly briefing on Monday said he didn't directly refer to Dr Mahathir but dwelt on the state of the economy, his policies and approach.

Ultimately, keeping direct references to Dr Mahathir off-limits was a case of the movements keeping to party discipline.

However, a true picture of what sort of impact Dr Mahathir will have can only be seen when delegates from the main body start taking to the podium over three days from today.

That, and how Abdullah will deal with the issue in his key note address and winding-up speech.