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PM has general election

in mind

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Comment

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CLEARLY it was a speech to rally the party members behind him, to tell the party partners in the Barisan Nasional to stop griping over the contents of the "social contract" – they are non-negotiable – and to tell the rest of Malaysians of the achievements and aspirations of the nation.

The ultimate purpose of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's speech at the opening of the Umno general assembly on Wednesday is obvious – the general election. The Umno-led BN coalition is going back to the people for a fresh mandate soon, maybe very soon.

As this was Abdullah's fourth address to the annual assembly since taking over as prime minister towards the end of 2003, he spoke more confidently, raising his voice sometimes for impact and even pausing at strategic places to acknowledge the applause.

But nowhere was the applause more thunderous than when he spoke almost in defence of the few who expressed sentiments which touched on communal sensitivities at the last assembly – the few who were scolded by the party after demonstration of unhappiness by the other BN parties.

It was a strategic turn-around. He blamed it on the live telecast which allowed those outside the assembly to view the Malay political rhetoric and said that even so, only a few touched on communal sensitivities.

The Dewan Merdeka almost came down and there were shouts of "hidup Pak Lah" when he said: "I believe that similar extremist sentiments are voiced by members of political parties that represent other communities."

Similar response met his remarks about the keris. "The act of unsheathing and kissing the keris is part of our cultural heritage, but its meaning has been twisted to spread fear among the non-Malays."

He said the New

Economic Policy (NEP) was being continued to help develop professional classes among the Malays and eradicate poverty among Malaysians, regardless of race, and it was never intended to make the Malays rich by seizing the wealth of the non-Malays.

By speaking out on these issues – the keris, Malay rights, the strengthening of Islam and the extension of the NEP, issues that were critically debated after last year's assembly by the non-Malays, including leaders of BN component parties – and saying that they were non-negotiable, Abdullah bowled the delegates over.

And unlike last year, they gave him a standing ovation.

As a way to not ruffle the feathers of BN partners, he said: "Umnó does not engage in duplicity. We do not change our tune to suit the occasion or the audience. We are ready to seek intelligent resolutions and win-win outcomes when dealing with sensitive issues relating to race and religion."

On these issues, it is better that they are discussed behind closed doors and BN parties should not allow themselves to be dragged into public discussions of them by the opposition parties.

He said as parties that control the government and exercise executive power, BN component parties should be strong and defend what had been agreed to 50 years ago and "we should never allow ourselves to sink" to the level of the Opposition.

Despite so much public debate over



A delegate gives Abdullah a hug.

SAIFUL HIZAM WANSOR/THESUN

issues of religion and race, the keris, the contents of the Merdeka social contract and the NEP, relations between BN component parties have not been affected much, he said.

It was as if he was saying: "Well, this bodes well for the coalition. There is so much to do. But first let's go out and win elections."

To win the support of the Malays outside of Umno, Abdullah recalled the Malacca sultanate – which was a great Malay empire but had lasted only a hundred years, after which the Malays were colonised for about 500 years.

He said the Malays were in control of their destiny now but it should not be just for a hundred years but for a long time to come.

The prime minister talked at length about the various growth corridors and reiterated that their focus would be the eradication of poverty in the rural areas and to bring the rural Malay standard of living close to that of those in the urban areas.

While there is freedom of worship in this country as enshrined in the Federal Constitution, which provides that Islam is the religion of the federation, he said Umno was committed to strengthening Islam and will not apologise for doing so.

And by way of addressing some of the concerns of non-Muslims, Abdullah said, "let us in Umno, show exemplary behaviour by respecting the followers of other religions and their needs".

theSun says: **God loves those who act equitably**

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