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UMNO GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Abdullah wants show of unity

By Ooi Kee Beng

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LAST September, Malaysia's dominant United Malays National Organisation (Umno) took the decision to postpone party elections that were to have been held this week.

The party's present general assembly will therefore be a relatively quiet affair, at least compared to last year. What the leadership is hoping for, given the unrest among Malaysians that the government is not doing enough to correct disturbing tendencies in the political life of the country, is for party delegates to behave.

Without party elections, damaging accusations about money politics - something many consider to be an ineradicable part of Umno culture today - will be absent.

As things look now, a general election will most probably be held before it is time for the next Umno polls. Prime Minister and party president Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will therefore be doing all he can to clothe the proceedings in an atmosphere of tolerance, and to push discussions more towards heightening Umno's role as the dominant party in a multiracial and multireligious country than towards rhetoric about Malay rights and supremacy.

The general assembly this year seems to have started rather well, with Datuk Seri Abdullah proclaiming the right things: tolerance for other races and religions, and the need for Malays to be more competitive. He also issued a warning that members should 'have some control' over the speeches.

The past record of Umno's annual meets does not give him good reason to hope for such a thing, though.

**Poor precedents**

ONE could take a look at the last three such meetings over which Datuk Seri Abdullah presided, for example. They were not without their dramatic and contentious moments.

In September 2004, at his first general assembly as party leader, he provided a belated account of what he had since January of that year meant by using the term 'Islam Hadhari', and called for Malays to seek knowledge, capacity and competitiveness. At the same time, he confessed that prolonged affirmative action had perpetuated prejudices it was meant to eradicate. He said then: 'There can be no self-worth for those who obtain positions, business opportunities and scholarships without real effort and qualification.'

Party elections were held that year, and as many as three Cabinet ministers lost their seats in the 25-man Supreme Council. This understandably shocked the party president and may have prompted him to avoid another such occasion by postponing this year's party elections.

Also noteworthy in 2004 was the election of then federal territories minister Mohamed Isa Abdul Samad as vice-president. He has since given up both positions after being investigated for money politics during the elections.

Also of significance at the 2004 elections was the rise of Datuk Seri Abdullah's son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin to the position of assistant head of Umno Youth. He won uncontested. With the postponement of party elections this time, there is every likelihood that he will stand for Parliament in the next general election, perhaps win uncontested and even be appointed Mentri Besar by his father-in-law, if recent rumours doing the rounds in Kuala Lumpur hold any substance.

### **Lucky boost**

AT the party meet in July 2005, Datuk Seri Abdullah's performance was given a lucky boost by the fact that China decided to unpeg its currency to the US dollar just when the Umno general assembly was meeting. He decided to follow suit immediately, and unpegged the Malaysian ringgit from the US dollar. Although this was what most experts had expected him to do, he came out looking like a leader who could think and act on his feet.

At the 2005 meeting, he coined the term 'Towering Malays' and promised more meritocracy at the same time. Umno Youth, however, called for a revival of the New Economic Policy. This served to confuse many, because although the NEP had ended in 1990, it did so only in name and not in effect.

Mr Khairy was instrumental in that call. The fact that he was not booed this time around, as he had been the year before, showed that his chosen tactic had worked in gaining him support from the younger ranks of the party.

Last year, it fell to Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak to announce the latest catchphrase to direct and guide the Malay community. He introduced the term 'glocal Malay' and has continued using this term this year.

Former premier Mahathir Mohamed, who had chosen to stay away from the meeting in 2005, tried his hardest to appear at the general assembly last November as a delegate. He had kept a public argument going throughout last year against Datuk Seri

Abdullah for bad leadership and for the dismantling of central parts of his legacy. A showdown at the assembly would have brought matters to a head.

Surprisingly, Tun Dr Mahathir failed to get elected as a delegate despite running in his old constituency of Kubang Pasu. He promised his supporters - and opponents - that he would attend the congress nevertheless. However, he suffered a mild heart attack just a week before the Umno assembly, saving the party from what would surely have been a major case of dirty linen being aired in public.

Last year's meeting proved to be a contentious affair nevertheless, not only within the party, but between the party and non-Malay observers. For the first time ever, the debates were telecast live. Many Malaysians were shocked at the provocative and racist language used.

The fact that Education Minister and head of Umno Youth Hishammuddin Hussein decided to unsheath a Malay keris for the second year in a row did much to worsen the atmosphere. His actions were seen as highly provocative by non-Malays, and totally unbecoming for a man in his position. It did not help that one delegate asked publicly when he was going to use the dagger now that he had unsheathed it twice.

The focus of attention at this year's meeting is therefore on Datuk Seri Hishammuddin. Will he or will he not unsheath the keris? He had said that he will and he did - at yesterday's annual youth assembly.

His action could be read by some as incorrigible arrogance on his part. That could hurt his political future, and the party in the coming general elections. If he had not done so, then some in the party might have vilified him for giving in to what they considered unjustified criticism from the outside on a party matter.

But this year, he urged the minorities not to see the dagger as a symbol of aggression, but as one of unity and protection for all races. His explanation could be read as a bid to soften the aggression in the ceremonial act, and thus save face and show sensitivity too.

Also this year, Datuk Seri Abdullah's nemesis Tun Dr Mahathir is recovering from heart surgery and will not attend the get-together. Again, his luck holds out.

What the Prime Minister will be wishing for is a party picnic. With his predecessor absent, billion-ringgit development programmes announced for all the states on the peninsula, party elections postponed and a whole year for him to pick a date for the general election, he will be seeking wide party support for his leadership.

After the latest rounds of criticism from various sectors of society, including the Malaysian Bar and even the sultans, a show of unity by his fellow Umno members, and their obedience to his call for tolerance, will be very much welcomed by him and the party leadership.

**The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He is the author of *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail And His Time* (ISEAS 2006).**