

One issue was constant in speeches given at the ongoing general assembly of the most powerful party in Malaysia, Umno



"The fact is, it (Malaysia's success) is not due to the exclusive contribution of one race,

but it is the fruit of collective labour of all races."

– Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak addressing the Umno general assembly yesterday



"The rights of the Malays and bumiputras as well as other races have been clearly stated in the

Constitution and any hope of amending it is just wishful thinking."

– Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin



"This too is their country. This is their country of birth and

that of their parents and grandparents."

– Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin saying that referring to non-Malay citizens as immigrants would hurt their feelings

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RACE relations is the hot button issue at this year's United Malays National Organisation (Umno) General Assembly, say observers.

The five-day party convention which began on Tuesday night, is an annual event where Malaysia's biggest and most powerful Malay party touches base with its members and defines its agenda.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin brought up the issue in speeches and press conferences.

New basis

Addressing the assembly yesterday, Mr Najib, who is the party's president, said Malaysia needs a new basis for race relations based on a shared future, historical facts and today's reality.

Umno is the dominant party in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition which also includes the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress.

But with the BN performing poorly in the 2008 elections (it lost its traditional two-thirds majority), Mr Najib could be trying to win over the non-Malays to drum up support, said one observer.

Dr Johan Saravanamuttu, a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, told The New Paper: "The two major non-Malay parties are weak, meaning the BN's strength isn't good."

"So Umno has to reach out to non-Malay partners to get more votes as non-Malays have proven to be swing voters."

In March, Mr Najib unveiled the New Economic Model (NEM) to revamp the New Economic Policy, which currently gives Malays

more privileges than other races.

He said that for Malaysia to survive in the global economy, it had to be inclusive of other races.

The most prominent element of the NEM is its proposed shift from a race-based affirmative-action policy which favours the Malays to a "needs-based" policy focused on helping the poorest 40 per cent of households regardless of race.

But the NEM has drawn criticisms from Malay traditionalists, including the hardline Malay rights group Perkasa.

Dr Saravanamuttu said: "Mr Najib hasn't been able to come down hard on the hardliners but he's encouraging moderates like Shahrizat Jalil (head of Umno's women's wing) to speak up."

He also pointed out that winning over non-Malays is especially crucial for Mr Najib as elections may be held next year.

He said: "Mr Najib has not yet proven himself by winning a proper election to show he has won the mandate to govern."

Mr Najib's predecessor, Mr Abdullah Badawi, stepped down last year after many Umno members openly asked him to take full responsibility for the BN's dismal performance at the last elections.

Establish authority

Dr Saravanamuttu said: "If Mr Najib makes no big gains, his party could also call on him to step down."

"But if he can regain the lost seats, he'll establish his authority and that would allow him to push his policies through."

Singapore Management University's Associate Professor Bridget Welsh, who researches South-east Asian affairs, told The New Paper that it is critical for Mr Najib to curb the racial rhetoric and "show that the party is national in scope rather than parochial and racial".