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News Analysis

UMNO ELECTIONS: CAN IT BE CLEAN AND FAIR?

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KUALA LUMPUR: There are early signs that the contest for seats in the Umno Supreme Council, except that of the president and deputy president, in the October party polls, will be a close and heated affairs.

According to observers, this is because money politics and misuse of power by certain leaders and members have not been wiped out in the party polls.

Various measures have been instituted by the party leadership to ensure that the race for party posts is conducted in a kindred spirit, including a set of regulations by a special assembly in 1994 to curtail the negative practices.

The latest measure in this direction is one requiring each and every one of the potential candidates to register with Umno headquarters the post they are going for, and they are also barred from campaigning till after July.

Despite this, say the observers, the latest trend and developments have yet to show the effectiveness of these measures in creating a healthy competition for the top posts.

At first glance, these measures would reduce the heat and tension of the contests and campaigns because of the limited time available.

They would also curtail all-out "attack" and "counter-attack" among the candidates who had, before the introduction of the regulations, appeared only at 11th hour to announce their candidacy for a particular post.

However, there is also the view that these measures would create more problems than resolve them. This is because the candidates would know early who they are up against and draw up their strategies accordingly.

"In this situation, the leader being challenged would resort to every resources available, including a lot of money to ensure his re-election," says a lecturer from an institution of higher learning here.

The challenger, on the other hand, would go all out to influence the party divisions, including money to buy the votes of their delegates.

A member of the Supreme Council meanwhile expresses the fear that if these meaasures are not closely monitored, it would open the door for outsiders to "sponsor" candidates who could further their interest.

Worse still, they could be materials to belittle Umno and its leaders by introducing lameducks ostensibly to spoil votes.

What is most worrying is that candidates without any credibility win the race through ringgit and sens.

"What will happen to the party and nation, if Umno is controlled by leaders who act in accordance with the wishes of outsiders or even a foreign power which is uncomfortable with the political stability and economy of Malaysia?" he said.

But there are others who are convinced that the rules and regulations would work against money politics because a member who did not register within the stipulated time period would not be able to contest even if he were nominated by some party divisions.

The same Supreme Council member also said the regulations could create more confusion because they are not legally binding and can be challenged in a court of law.

They are, at best, a set of rules for the members to abide by the decision of the party leaders and a test of their loyalty for Umno -- similar to the resolution adopted at the general assembly last year stating

that there should be no contest for the post of president, held by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and deputy president, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, at least until the party polls in 1999.

"These decisions are not made in accordance with the party constitution and could be taken advantage of by people who want to create problems for Umno for their own selfish gains," he said.

In this context therefore, the October elections are expected to be heated. Under the new rules, Wanita Umno leader Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, for example, knows well ahead that she would be challenged by her Exco member, Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman.

Rafidah, say the observers, cannot be expected to take the challenge lightly and will pool all her resources to face her challenger.

In the case of the youth wing, several leaders had stated their intention early to go for the top post now held by Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik and the deputy head post occupied by Datuk Nazri Tan Sri Aziz.

While it is not clear how Rahim and Nazri will place their pieces in their political chessboard, the movement's information chief, Datuk Zahid Hamidi, has offered himself for the top post. An exco member, Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein, is said to be eyeing the deputy seat.

In addition, Negeri Sembilan Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohd Isa Abdul Samad is tipped to be another contender for the youth chairman post.

All said, the Umno elections will be a closely fought and heated affairs for the three vice president and 25 Supreme Council seats -- the inner sanctum of the party.

The three incumbent vice presidents -- Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd Taib -- are certain to defend their posts. From early announcements made, they are to be challenged by four Supreme Council members -- Datuk Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib, Datuk Syed Hamid Albar dan Datuk Haji Abdul Ghani Othman.

At the level of the Supreme Council, about 100 names comprising incumbents and new faces have either offered themselves for election or are edging closer to the registration table at the Umno headquarters to vie for the posts.

An Umno veteran feels that money politics and abuse of power could be overcome to a certain extent if all the Umno Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers were appointed to the Supreme Council without having to contest.

He says experience has shown that the need for them to join the fray had contributed to the intense politicking, given their position and power to influence the votes of a large segment of the delegates from their respective states.

"What will happen if, say, the Menteri Besar or Chief Minister were to indulge in 'horse trading' (with the votes under their control) with the other states and divisions to widen their personal influence and probably personal gain?" he said.

The veteran is afraid that some of the division heads might resort to "trading" the votes of the 11 delegates in their respective divisions to secure votes (if they are standing for a particular post) or monetary rewards from the other states or candidates.

He also suggests that specific regulations be drawn up so that only those who had been a vice president or Supreme Council member, can go for the president or deputy president post.

Those going for the vice presidency should have been a Supreme Council member before, while those going for the council seats must hold a position at the divisional level. -- Bernama