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A News Analysis

UMNO POLLS: OVERZEALOUS CAMPAIGN CAN DESTROY PARTY

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KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 20 (Bernama) -- With about four years to go before the curtain closes on the 20th century, the Umno general assembly slated for October is seen as a very important milestone.

Although it has been resolved that there will not be any contest for the post of president and deputy president, political analysts said the assembly is definitely exciting because it will see the elections of the next echelon of leaders and directly point to the form and direction of the party into the new millennium.

Among the vital posts in the party hierarchy up for grasp in the triennial party elections are the three posts of vice president and 25 Supreme Council seats.

It is public knowledge that the three incumbent vice presidents -- Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak dan Tan Sri Muhammad Muhd Taib -- and a majority of the council members had stated their intention to defend their posts.

What is interesting, however, is that unlike previous elections, the aspirants of these posts seemed to have jumped the gun by announcing their candidacy so early in the race.

Among them are some who had activated their campaign machinery, even though the party polls is 10 months away.

For the vice president posts, three challengers had announced their intention to take on the incumbents. The first was Datuk Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, followed by Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib and Datuk Syed Hamid Albar.

To many political observers, the early call by the challengers is a zeal that could only lead to an intense and heated bickering by the time the delegates cast their votes.

And this apparently, is what is worrying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is Umno president, and his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

As seen from past experiences, the overheated jockeying for positions had not only undermined the unity and strength of the party but it had also marred the smooth and effectiveness of government in the country.

Sources within the party said Dr Mahathir is worried that these early announcements could result in these leaders and their aides and supporters spending too much time on campaign and politicking at the expense of their mandate and public office.

Many of them are holders of public office like ministers, menteri besar, members of parliament and state assemblymen.

In the case of the vice presidential race, the three incumbents and aspirants are holders of high public offices. Muhyiddin is the Minister of Youth and Sports, Najib is the Education Minister and Muhammad is the Menteri Besar of Selangor while Abdullah is the Foreign Minister, Ramli is the Menteri Besar of Perak dan Syed Hamid is the Defence Minister.

It is learnt that it was in this context that the Supreme Council, in its January 16 meeting, decided to urge the contestants to refrain from campaigning at present but to do so some two or three months before the assembly.

According to the sources, Dr Mahathir and Anwar are unhappy with the campaign approach that has started, like dropping their names, abuse of positions and power for personal political interest, and practices that

smack of money-politics.

The two leaders are reported to have taken a firm stand in that they will not give their blessings to any of the candidates, to ensure a fair contest for all. Instead, they will oversee the elections process and will not endorse anyone.

Thus, it is safer for those involved to avoid using the two leaders' name by making claims that their candidacies were endorsed by the president or his deputy.

It is learnt that Dr Mahathir has denied outright claims by certain quarters that he had consented to the use of his division and parliamentary constituency of Kubang Pasu as the launching ground of any candidate.

It is also learnt that within the same context, the latest Supreme Council meeting came up with a directive to all incumbents and aspirants not to form any committee or to set up operation rooms for campaign purposes.

According to the sources, the top leaders are also unhappy with the attitude of some of the Supreme Council members who are going all out to obtain a higher placing in the list of those voted in. To them, whether a council member is placed first or last in the list of 25 is of no consequence as long as he is elected to the council.

"UMNO practises collective responsibility and all members of the Supreme Council are vested with similar power and have the same role to play. Such over-zealousness is understandable if a candidate who was placed on the 26th or 27th position during the last elections, is eager to have his name in the winning list this time around," said an analyst.

These sources said what Dr Mahathir and Anwar really want to see is kinship and goodwill pervading the forthcoming elections.

As a start, they said Dr Mahathir wants every Umno division or state liaison committee wishing to invite a vice presidential or supreme council candidate to their function, to extend the same courtesy to all candidates.

According to the analysts, if one were to take a closer look at Dr Mahathir's suggestion, one could see his desire to bring back the tradition seen in the early days of Umno, where the contests were seeped in Malay culture.

In those days, the campaigns were more polite, where the outcome would not be dictated by political brokers or monetary inducement and there were no "hijacking" of delegates or slandering.

Instead, they all placed the party above all other interests.

Despite all their shortcomings -- some were illiterate and many were poor -- they were resolute and sincere in one thing, that is, to uphold the interest of the party.

The rationale in Dr Mahathir's stance is therefore clear -- that a leader, who is corrupt and greedy and who abuses his power, should not be elected to lead the country. -- Bernama