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Umno-Elections

CONTEST OR COMPROMISE: BRANCHES HOLD THE KEY

A news focus

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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 11 (Bernama) -- The significance of annual meetings of Umno branches this year, starting tomorrow until March 15, cannot simply be overlooked although no contest for positions is involved, political observers said.

The meetings, involving 2.6 million members from 16,639 branches, deserved to be reckoned with all the same because of the sheer impact of the outcome, the observers said.

What come out of them would reflect the mood and how the Umno grassroots would interpret party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call for no contest for divisional posts in the interests of Umno.

Indeed, it is the branch meetings that would determine how Umno divisional leadership for the coming term would be decided, either through contest or compromise, during divisional delegates' conferences that would follow from March 12 to 29.

Obviously, branches seeking for change in divisional leadership would nominate individuals whom they see fit to take over at the delegates' conferences.

Or, on the other hand, if they want to avert contest they could just take heed of Dr Mahathir's advice for no contest by adopting various ways such as motioning for the retention of the incumbent divisional leadership.

Analysts said, if read between the lines, Dr Mahathir's statement clearly did not at all say about totally disallowing any change at divisional leadership, except for those in Kelantan.

What it said is that, change, if any, should be instituted properly through negotiations and not contests.

Apparently Dr Mahathir's advice was based on the bitter experience of the all-out scramble for posts in past divisional elections which had not only split Umno members but also exposed them to rampant money politics.

As for Kelantan, Dr Mahathir, who is also the state Umno liaison chairman, had announced that Kelantan Umno had agreed that divisional chief posts are not contested for party's sake.

This is because Umno could ill afford disunited party members if they were to unseat the PAS-controlled Kelantan government.

As for the other states, Dr Mahathir's statement is to mean that, if Umno members feel that a divisional leadership needs changing to consolidate the party, they would not have to nominate challengers to remove the incumbents.

Instead, they could initiate divisional leadership change through negotiations and discreet use of powers and not by subscribing to factional sentiments or pursuing selfish ends.

Interestingly, since it was issued Dr Mahathir's statement has elicited various interpretations and Umno members generally regarded it more as an advice rather than a directive.

Such interpretations gained credence when Dr Mahathir himself, who was approached by journalists about the statement recently, explained that he was only advising members to avoid contest for party's sake.

But then, he said, there was nothing that the president or the party could do if members chose not to heed the advice.

However, Umno secretary-general Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik had repeatedly said: "If not the president's, then whose advice do we listen to?"

Sabbaruddin said personally he thought that from the tone of Dr Mahathir's explanation to the journalists, the Umno president would indeed like to see that party members take the advice with Umno's interests in mind.

So far the state Umno leadership in Selangor, Sabah and Perak, to name a few, have already decided to accept Dr Mahathir's statement as a directive and abide by it.

But it is beyond them to gauge how far their Umno branches and divisions would obey it.

Some feel that contest for posts is necessary to maintain the semblance of democracy in Umno and, in some cases, inevitable as the leadership of some divisions really need changing for various reasons.

Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi maintains that contest in divisions whose leadership needs changing is necessary.

This conviction of the Umno Youth was reinforced today when the movement's vice chief Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein was quoted as saying that contest for posts at divisional level, if meant to consolidate Umno, would not have a divisive effect on the party.

Analysts contend that initiating a change in divisional leadership through negotiation is easier said than done.

The analysts' reasoning is that either the incumbent leaders themselves would not compromise or that their supporters would rather opt for a showdown with the challengers thus making an eventual contest unavoidable.

Such divisional leaders are the very people who, on the one hand, laud the desire of the Umno leadership to avert contest for divisional posts, but, on the other, deem such idea too idealistic to be practicable.

Some tend to look at the idea of a negotiated leadership change as only to sweep the dust under the carpet and not actually providing any solution to ineffective divisional leadership.

One view is that effecting a change in Umno divisional leadership in such a way would instead only fan resentment and disquiet among party members especially those in divisions labelled as in dire need of leadership change.

Notwithstanding the prevailing preoccupation with steering the country out of the current economic turbulence, as from tomorrow attention would definitely focus on Umno branch meetings nation-wide, albeit a temporary diversion, since their outcome would dictate where Umno members are headed for pending more crucial Umno elections next year. -- BERNAMA

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