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Difficult task of making decision on Umno No 2 post

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THE adjournment sine die of the Dewan Rakyat on Thursday was greeted with more than a little relief by a large number of Umno MPs.

It was obvious the MPs had more than just Bills and debate on their mind for every opportunity found them clustered in earnest discussion in the lobby, the canteen and the cosy government backbenchers' lounge.

The reason for their preoccupation: news that the Prime Minister might appoint a deputy after all.

Talk has it that the majority of Menteri Besar/State Umno liaison chairmen were of the view that a Deputy Prime Minister ought to be appointed soon and this had been conveyed to the Prime Minister in a meeting two weeks ago.

This development is a departure from an earlier decision to leave the post vacant until a deputy president is elected at next year's Umno elections.

By last Monday, the day of the Umno supreme council meeting, discussions about the post made vacant by the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim had reached such a pitch that some even thought "the announcement" would be made that night.

Of course, there was no such announcement and the end of the meeting saw Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad merely confirming that the subject was raised but declining to elaborate.

In fact, the matter was not even on the agenda; it cropped up only when the supreme council was discussing the general political situation.

But it is no secret by now that the supreme council has given Dr Mahathir the mandate to decide whether or not to appoint a Deputy Prime Minister as well as who to appoint.

"No conditions. It's all up to PM," says a supreme council member.

There is a strong possibility that the Prime Minister may - again - decide against any appointment for now and defer the decision till next year's party elections.

But that has not dampened the undercurrent of excitement not only in Umno but also circles outside Umno.

The party, says Umno Youth committee leader Abdul Aziz Sheikh Fadzir, has never been without "a clear successor in sight."

"For so long, we had the idea that after Dr Mahathir, comes Anwar and after him, (Datuk Seri) Najib (Razak). Then, suddenly ... this. Yes, you could say we are not used to not having a No 2," he says.

The main reasons for filling the post have been well-articulated: a deputy can assist the Prime Minister in these challenging economic and political times and, perhaps more important, provide the sense of certainty so crucial to political stability.

Says Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim: "It's pretty mixed feelings on the ground. Some feel it's urgent to have a DPM now, others say wait till June, that it's a very important decision which is best left to the delegates."

Shahidan himself favours an early decision "for the sake of the country and party."

Umno leaders are also concerned about the looming Sabah elections and they think a Deputy Prime Minister could play a big role there.

There is also a psychological side to the issue - the vacant No 2 post is a painful reminder of the controversial sacking and filling it could

help refocus attention on the new man.

But the downside to this is that whoever is picked as the next Deputy Prime will immediately assume an unfair advantage in the widely-expected contest next year.

The choice has narrowed down to three serious candidates - vice-presidents Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Razak and one-time Finance Minister Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Tun Daim Zainuddin (he told an Umno colleague: "I'm not interested and the subject is closed; the moment the economy recovers, it's bye-bye") and Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz (she's resigned to the fact that Umno is "not ready for a woman PM") figure only as fringe candidates.

None of the three main figures have actually said that they are, to borrow one of the most ingenious phrases in local politics, "offering themselves."

But as the saying goes, action often speaks louder than words and there are few doubts that the trio are very, very interested.

Besides, their aides are less reticent about doing the talking and have no compunction airing the merits of their man. Each camp of aides claim their man is the better choice.

Both Najib and Abdullah, being within the party hierarchy, have a definite edge over Tengku Razaleigh, and more so now with the possibility of the Prime Minister making an early appointment.

Says Merbok Umno Wanita chief Rosnah Majid: "Most people don't see the PM appointing someone from outside the hierarchy, that is, if you want to go by party tradition. But you never know with PM."

The "tradition" referred to by Rosnah is the 1976 episode in Umno's history. Tun Razak had just passed away, Tun Hussein Onn had succeeded him as Prime Minister and rumours were rife that the latter was considering Ghazali Shafie as his deputy.

But the three vice-presidents then - Tun Ghafar Baba, Tengku Razaleigh and Dr Mahathir - took it upon themselves to press Hussein to take his pick from within the party hierarchy.

Hussein's eventual decision was hailed as adhering to tradition although not strictly so. Dr Mahathir, his choice, was the most junior of the three and had previously been expelled from the party for criticising Tunku Abdul Rahman.

In fact, he admitted the day he made the announcement that he "did not expect 100 per cent approval" and as though to underscore that, Ghafar quit the Cabinet.

Dr Mahathir himself looked to the vice-presidents for a No 2 - he chose Ghafar - when Tan Sri Musa Hitam walked out on him.

But as Rosnah pointed out, you can never quite tell with Dr Mahathir, so Tengku Razaleigh's chances in the event of an early appointment cannot be entirely discounted.

Some say these are unusual times and unusual times call for unusual decisions. Besides, the ground sentiment at the moment seems to be for Tengku Razaleigh.

Says a KL Wanita Umno politician: "It's Razaleigh ... seven out of 10 people (in the party) I talk to."

The other reason is that Tengku Razaleigh has turned out to be a more comfortable choice among former supporters of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

For instance, Sabah Umno which invited him to talk on the economy gave him an exceptionally warm reception.

Officially, the Kelantan prince "has not decided." But it is known that a large number of Umno politicians, branch leaders, division heads and wakil rakyat - some of whom he has not seen in years - have been beating a path to his Langgak Golf residence-cum-office, asking him to "offer

yourself."

Those for the prince argue the most crucial issues now are the economic situation and state of the party.

They argue that economic recovery underpins the survival of the ruling party, that was why Dr Mahathir pulled Daim back from retirement into the Cabinet; so why not Tengku Razaleigh as well.

But whether the Prime Minister appoints someone now or later, the lobbying and campaigning has already begun in anticipation of next year's contest.

"It's really quite intense," says a ministerial aide.

And that has got many Umno figures worried. They dread the idea of a fight for that means they will have to declare their choice and take sides.

"It's okay if our man wins but what if he doesn't? Finish for us, man!" says a division head.

"Whoever takes over must be able to unite the party but the contest for the post may itself cause splits," was the ironical observation of Dr Ahmad Atory Hussain, an Umno member and academic.

The party is in a vulnerable state, as Umno leaders will privately acknowledge and the last thing needed is a divisive fight.

The likelihood of it being a big fight is there. Umno members won't only be choosing a successor but they could very well be electing the next Prime Minister because whoever fills the vacancy must be ready to run the country in a very short time.

Tengku Razaleigh is said to be reluctant to see a contest: he probably does not want to be accused of causing another split.

There is also the potential awkwardness of Tengku Razleigh who was Tun Razak's blue-eyed boy, facing off Najib, Tun Razak's eldest son.

"But my hunch is there will be no contest ... maybe a compromise," says the head of a local think-tank.

But the biggest irony still remains the monopoly of viewpoint that Umno members enjoy over a process from which will eventually emerge the Prime Minister of all Malaysians.

Says a Malay lawyer: "If only all Malaysians had a say ... I think the quality of the man would be better if he had to tailor himself to the aspirations and sentiments of all Malaysians."

But since that is not to be the case, he suggests that Umno delegates seriously consider the kind of social and political landscape they are looking for in a post-Mahathir Malaysia.

"Dr Mahathir did very well. He gave us a Malaysian identity, put the physical things in place and equipped us for the next step forward. Now we must grapple with the challenges of the intangibles of development. Whoever takes over must be prepared to bring in a new political process, a new social contract," says the lawyer.

Umno, in that sense, does not only enjoy the privilege of choosing the country's Prime Minister but with it also comes a terrible responsibility.

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