

13/12/1998

Qualities Dr M will be looking for

A. Kadir Jasin

AS Umno leaders and members sit in conference at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur today to amend the party constitution, their concerns will almost certainly not be limited to the agenda for the meeting.

This is not to say that amending the party's constitution is unimportant. It is important. This is particularly so because the proposed changes involve the mechanics for choosing party leaders.

Their interest and concerns will also be focused on the appointment of a new Deputy Prime Minister.

Although this is not on the agenda, the one-day extraordinary general meeting offers the delegates, observers and ordinary party members an opportunity to risik-risik (inquire) and bisik-bisik (whisper) as to who is most likely to be appointed to the post and when.

They will be looking for further hints from party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Prime Minister has not spoken very much on the matter, except for a brief statement on Sept 22 when he said "I must have a man who is capable of carrying on, a man who is trustworthy and honourable".

That statement set off the hunt for the most likely candidate who is considered capable of carrying on, trustworthy and honourable.

Granted that the appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister is the prerogative of the Prime Minister, there will still be no shortage of members who would like their views and opinions to be considered by Dr Mahathir when he makes his decision.

To begin with, an increasing number of senior party leaders, including those in the supreme council, are saying quite openly that the appointment should not be held back any longer.

They are also saying that the search for a suitable candidate should be confined to the existing holders of the party's top posts since a number of positions have fallen vacant.

The party is without a deputy president and one of the three elected posts of vice-president is vacant. The youth wing is also without a leader.

So, alongside vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the names of Tun Daim Zainuddin and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah are also mentioned as possible candidates.

But for the Prime Minister, it is not only about choosing a deputy. He has to choose a deputy whom he can work with, who is acceptable to the majority of Umno members and respected by the majority of the people.

The person must not only be able to assist the Prime Minister in strengthening the political leadership, but equally important, he must understand the economy.

We cannot repeat the debacle of the last one-and-half years. The credibility of our economic management, especially our recovery plan, depends on having a core of people who are knowledgeable about the economy and are able to work together at the top.

Any Tom, Dick or Harry can do well in good times but only the best economic managers can steer the economy out of trouble. The Prime Minister needs a good deputy, and soon.