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Speculation on three main contenders

DATUK SERI NAJIB RAZAK, 45:

AS impeccable a pedigree as they come in Malay politics - his father Tun Razak Hussein was the country's second Prime Minister and his uncle Tun Hussein Onn the third. His relative youth seems to be against him - the perception of political maturity among Malays is still someone above 50 - but his age belies his experience in the party and Government. He joined the party in 1976 after his father's death and worked his way up, clinching the Youth chief post before becoming vice-president in 1993. Besides an impressive track record in several ministries, he has been Menteri Besar of Pahang. He is credited with intellectual breadth and depth and for his ability to harness the civil service almost the way his father had done. Largely educated abroad, one of his shortcomings is said to be his outlook on Islamic matters but his aides say he can always consult the religious experts.

DATUK ABDULLAH AHMAD BADAWI, 59:

Known as "Dollah" to his contemporaries and "Pak Lah" to others, he has for years enjoyed the reputation of "Mr Nice Guy" in the party. His grandfather and father were born and schooled in Mecca, a fact that never fails to impress the Umno grassroots. His religious background continues to be his strong point and his political career has somehow escaped the sully of money politics. He told the NST once: "I have never paid people to support me."

His appointment as Foreign Minister in 1991 marked his return to the Cabinet after four years in the political wilderness; he had not backed Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the 1987 fight although he did not follow Razaleigh out of Umno.

He is the longest serving vice-president and although dropped from the Cabinet, he came in first in the vice-president race in 1990. His time at the Foreign Ministry has coincided with Malaysia's most proactive years in global affairs. His supporters say he has the ability to reconsolidate Umno, his detractors suggest he lacks economic skills.

TENGGU RAZALEIGH HAMZAH, 61:

It is likely that his position in this configuration of potential No 2's will one day be seen as one of the most intriguing bits of Umno's history. After losing in the bitter fight of 1987, he left to form a new party and entered into a coalition with Pas in Kelantan.

In 1996, he returned to the motherlode with thousands of supporters but declared that he was content to be just a "gurkha". He was just that, until the political crisis. His star is shining bright again and his intellect and former experience as Finance Minister are seen as strong points - plus the appeal of his royal lineage and oodles of personal charm and charisma. Known by the abbreviated `Ku 'Li although no one really dares call him that in the face; they use the less abbreviated and more deferential Tengku 'Li. Despite having called Dr Mahathir all kinds of names while he was in the opposition, the two are now said to have a cordial and respectful relationship.

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