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Umno should temper unavoidable contest at divisions with wisdom

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FOR about one month beginning Feb 12, Umno members throughout the country will be looking for new grassroots leaders. From that date to March 15, they will be electing office bearers who will run the party's 16,639 branches while from March 12 to March 29, they will be electing officers who will manage the 165 branches in the country.

Of the two, the election at the divisional level is far more exciting and important. Divisional election is held every three years, which is followed by the election of members to the Supreme Council, the party's highest ranking body, the following year.

To date, Umno headquarters headcount showed a membership strength of about 2.6 million. Of the country's population of about 10 million Malays, this means that one in every five Malays is an Umno member. The percentage is definitely higher after discounting children and other non-eligibles.

This means that as a political machinery, Umno, as the major component of the ruling coalition, commands respect and attention. Hence, the excitement surrounding the divisional elections in the whole country.

The excitement is not only confined to those directly or indirectly involved. In any Umno election, who wins and who the contestants are attract equal attention and scrutiny. And this year's election is no exception.

One element in this year's election is the party president's view on the matter. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told Umno members to avoid contest for the divisional chairman's post, wherever possible. Elaborating, he stressed that this was an advice which he felt should be adhered to, adding that he would be disappointed if the advice is not heeded.

This has led to numerous interpretations from among the rank and file, and especially more so among incumbents and aspirants. Along with the interpretations come criticisms, claiming that the advice smacks of an undemocratic twist.

Before Umno members start accusing their leaders of promoting undemocratic practices, they should take a breather and analyse the president's statement carefully and deeply, drawing from the party's experience in such matters. Dr Mahathir would not have come out with such an advice if he had not given much thought to it in the first place.

The advice is not a blanket intimation. It only applies to the top post at the divisional level, meaning contests are not discouraged for the other posts. Therefore, to suggest that Umno is promoting an undemocratic culture in terms of electing its office bearers is not accurate.

And as if to underline the party's democratic traditions despite the advice, two of the three Umno divisions in Perlis seemed certain to see contests for the top post. If they stick to their declared intentions, and seem against the "don't contest" advice, the two divisions appeared set to go against it.

In the two divisions, several personalities have made known their intention to contest. In the Kangar division, former Deputy Home Minister Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad said he would be making a bid for the top post, where he is now deputy chief. The incumbent is Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Pawanteh, who was Menteri Besar from 1986 to 1995, who declared that he would defend his post.

In the Padang Besar division, three contenders have emerged - incumbent Datuk Azmi Khalid, who is Deputy Housing and Local Government Minister;

deputy division chairman and State Assembly Speaker Datuk Bahari Taib, and businessman Wan Nordin Murad.

It remains to be seen whether there would be contests in the other divisions. Contests in Umno is not new. Also not new is the spirit of mesyuarah (consensus) which has been one of the party's hallmarks since its founding days over 50 years ago.

This spirit of mesyuarah has served the party well and the increased influence of democracy lent further credence that Umno is a progressive party. On the flip side, the party's adoption of democratic principles have always been tempered with a dose of Malaysian-style pre-contest consultations.

Umno's adherence to democratic principles, however, has not been trouble-free. In the 1987 contest for the party's top posts, the party was split down the middle, leading to it being declared unlawful by the Kuala Lumpur High Court, forcing it to be de-registered.

It has since been reconstituted but not before a splinter party, in the form of Semangat 46, later renamed Parti Melayu Semangat 46, being formed. It, too, was subsequently dissolved and a big portion of its leaders and members returning to the Umno fold.

It is also a fact that some wounds take a long time to heal after the contest, especially at the divisional level. In fact, it is no secret that some divisions remain split and a free for all contest at such level will create more factions, thus undermining the party's overall unity.

Perhaps, it is this that prompted Dr Mahathir to come out with the "don't contest" advice. More than anything else, he wants to see a solid and fully united Umno to lead the country towards the next millenium, not a party bogged by divisive politicking right down to the grassroots.

Umno need not feel defensive about the advice as it has proven its adherence to democratic principles time and again. Its members, some of whom are aspiring to move up the ladder through the election process, should know that by now. There are other ways where they can gain prominence and catch the presidential eye in the hope that they be given bigger responsibilities and rewards, such as that of becoming a Yang Berhormat.

In the absence of a contest, it is interesting to see how the divisions deal with ineffective leaders in its midst. Would they give up their hold willingly, paving the way for a smooth transfer of power and leadership. While promoting the idea of a contest-free election, the president did not, however, say that incumbents cannot give up their chairmanship.

But if they choose to do so, then a contest-free transfer of leadership is desirable. Given today's stakes in the political game, not many are prepared to surrender their grip; but by the same argument, many seemed prepared to go all out to bid for a place.

Contest or no-contest, the divisional election is another test of Umno's maturity, especially whether its traditional judicious tempering of the democratic process can still steer the party towards consolidation. In view of next year's contest for supreme council posts, consolidation is what the party needs most, not divisive grassroot problems which can undermine its credibility.

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