

18/03/1998

Umno members should take heed of two important messages

Ahmad A. Talib

TWO important messages were stressed to members at the ongoing Umno divisional annual general meetings - help maintain political stability and rally behind the Government as it tries to revitalise the economy.

Messages similar to these have been conveyed to the grassroots in previous meetings and in numerous other forums, but they have added significance this time around given the economic problem the country is facing.

Umno members should take heed of these messages even though attention is inevitably focused on several divisions which have defied advice and instruction from party headquarters not to have contests.

Party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad hit the nail on the head with his comments on Thursday that now was not the time to push for changes in the party leadership. Instead, every member should make efforts to help revitalise the economy their priority.

Dr Mahathir reminded members that it was now more crucial than ever for them to be united and strong so as to be able to thwart any attempts to destabilise the country politically and economically.

He said that contests, if and when really necessary, should come later, when the national economy was back on track. Spending time and money on divisional elections at this point may dilute the present attempt to help the economy recover from the battering brought about by the ringgit's depreciation and decline in stock prices.

Dr Mahathir said this to party members when he officiated the Kuala Selangor AGM. Umno's divisional meetings are important channels of communication between the party hierarchy and grassroots.

The party has 165 divisions representing 2.6 million members. The divisions have until March 29 to conclude their business. It is at such meetings that party leaders have a captive audience to pass their messages to.

Other party leaders are also invited to open some of these meetings. They criss-cross the peninsula bringing words of advice and, where necessary, warnings to those who may cause proceedings to be disrupted.

Party deputy president Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was one of the busiest last week. On Saturday he covered three States - Malacca (Jasin), Negri Sembilan (Kuala Pilah) and Selangor (Serdang). The following day Anwar covered four divisions in Perak - Tanjung Malim, Lumut, Batu Gajah and Tambun.

Given the environment within which the AGMs are being held, words of wisdom from senior party leaders should help calm nerves and make for smooth proceedings. But the records also show that wise words and caution alone are insufficient to curb rising and frayed tempers.

It is recalled that a few annual meetings at the branch level in recent weeks saw fights which led to police intervention and arrests - a relatively new culture Umno can do without. If these fights are not nipped in the bud, Dr Mahathir and other party leaders will surely have a tough "fight" on their hands.

Dr Mahathir's comments deserve scrutiny by party members. Many of them may argue that political stability is seldom in doubt, much less disrupted, in recent times. And they may also argue that revitalising the economy is everybody's task, not just theirs.

If members choose to ignore these messages and instead pursue higher

positions in the party, then the threat to party unity becomes more real. A threat to Umno is also a threat to the Barisan Nasional, and the country can't afford either.

Everyone, and not just Umno members, must be made to realise that political stability and economic well-being and resilience go hand in hand always. It would be time well spent if members at their meetings were to dwell on this matter at length and contribute ways and means to achieve both targets.

Umno members would also be watching how many more divisions would have contests for the top post. Dr Mahathir was not against contests at the divisional level, but others like him feared that these would have long-term negative impact on the party.

One division which saw contest for the top post was Rasah, in Negri Sembilan where Rantau branch head Mohamad bin Hassan beat the incumbent, State Legislative Assembly Speaker Datuk Hamdan Mohamed.

Another was in Klang, where businessman Adnan Zakaria beat incumbent Datuk Zakaria Md Deris while Hulu Selangor saw the departure of Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib as division head. This marked another chapter in the political career of the former Selangor Menteri Besar who is facing charges in Australia.

He could no longer defend his position after the supreme council decided that those facing court cases were barred from participating in party elections. It does appear that generally, the no-contest advice and instruction seem to be well heeded. But it remains to be seen whether the behind-the-scene lobbying and negotiations would yield compromises or prompt vigorous bids to unseat the incumbents.

In the elections thus far, several supreme council members have retained their divisional leadership without contest. They include Selangor Umno liaison chief Datuk Abu Hassan Omar in Kuala Selangor; Perak liaison chief Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib in Pasir Salak; Negri Sembilan chief Tan Sri Isa Abdul Samad in Teluk Kemang; Johor chief Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman in Muar; Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak in Pekan and Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed in Jeli.

Aside from the isolated contests, all eyes are also on the 31 divisions whose meetings will be supervised by supreme council members. This supervision was necessary to ensure that no incidents would mar or cause the proceedings to be disrupted.

Indeed, the maturity of Umno members is being tested well ahead of next year's election to the supreme council, where the stakes are higher. The question is: how many members are mature enough to put the party's (and the country's) interest above self?

(END)