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Who can lay claim to the country's No 2 job?

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IT was with more than a sense of anti-climax when journalists covering the Umno supreme council meeting earlier last week saw the brown leather chair next to Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad still vacant.

The meeting had ended without anyone, except probably the Prime Minister, any clearer on the question of succession in Umno, and more important, the identity of the next Deputy Prime Minister.

The Umno deputy presidency, Dr Mahathir announced, would be determined at the party elections next year, but he would exercise his prerogative as Prime Minister to appoint the Deputy Prime Minister.

For many Malaysians, the statement was as good as an official declaration that the guessing game was on - not only about who Dr Mahathir will name as Deputy Prime Minister but whether he will even pick one before the party general assembly.

Still, most Umno people are of the mindset that although there are two vacancy signs flashing, only one qualified candidate is called for.

Political convention, and a rather uniquely Malaysian one at that, has seen to it that the deputy president of Umno not only gets to become the Deputy Prime Minister but is also the Prime Minister-in-waiting.

And that basically explains why the contest for Umno deputy president is often as critical, if not more political, than that for the presidency. It also explains why the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia assumes an incredibly high-profile role, unlike the faceless deputies in other countries.

Or, as Umno supreme council member Datuk Ibrahim Ali points out: "The protocol (accorded the DPM) is almost on par with that for the PM."

Both the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, says Ibrahim, enjoy the honorific of Yang Amat Berhormat, go about with motorcade escorts, their views are sought on every major issue and both enjoy intense media coverage.

Such is the strategic importance of being Deputy Prime Minister that the guessing game on the post is often infused with an undercurrent of politicking especially if the discussion involves supporters of those whose names have surfaced as candidates.

Topping the list are, of course, Umno vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

As far as the Umno traditionalists go, these two are the only candidates; they find it inconceivable that the president would depart so far from tradition as to pick someone from beyond the top hierarchy.

What, they ask, is the point of going through the consuming process of electing vice-presidents if they are not meant as third-liners to the party leadership?

Says political scientist Dr Hussein Mohamed: "It's essentially between Najib and Pak Lah. They are the two serious candidates."

But, he notes, Najib's people would probably insist he has more claim to the post because he garnered the most votes (among the three vice-presidents) in the 1996 party elections whereas Abdullah's supporters would probably say their man deserves it because he is more senior.

At the same time, even the traditionalists concede that it would be patently unfair to the other if Dr Mahathir were to pick either one as Deputy Prime Minister now. The advantage to the one picked would be simply too overwhelming.

The less traditional point to the fact that Dr Mahathir has been known to buck the trend. Hence, the possibility of him picking someone other than one of the two vice-presidents cannot be entirely dismissed.

Among the names from outside the vice-presidency: Financial wizard Tun Daim Zainuddin, former Wanita Umno leader Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and, of course, the Kelantan prince Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

Daim's name crops up precisely because many see him as someone whom the Prime Minister trusts implicitly.

"It's important that the DPM is someone the PM feels comfortable with ... he definitely feels comfortable with Tun Daim," says former academic Ahmad Shabery Chik.

The catch is that Daim is famously uninterested in politics and it is no great secret that he much prefers the flexibility and no less influential role as the power behind the throne.

Rafidah got on the list largely on account of her credentials as a super-technocrat.

It is a sign of the times that whoever becomes Prime Minister must also understand the world of economics and few are as qualified as Rafidah in this respect.

The only trouble is, as an Umno politician says rather sheepishly, "she's a woman". The main body of Umno, despite periodic and lavish praises heaped on the Wanita wing, is simply not ready for a woman at the top.

And although Rafidah - and the same might be said of Daim - is respected in Umno, she lacks ground support because she does not bother to play the popularity game.

Tengku Razaleigh, on the other hand, comes out well on both counts.

"He has the experience. He didn't deviate from the Malay struggle even when out of Umno," says Hussein.

Many expect this polished politician to go for the No 2 post next year but he is too seasoned to give even the barest of hint this early on.

All this is assuming that the Prime Minister intends to appoint a deputy for the period from now till the Umno general assembly makes its choice.

Ibrahim begs to defer.

He suggests that Dr Mahathir may be less than keen to assert his preference a third time - both Tan Sri Musa Hitam and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim were the president's handpicked choices (Tun Ghafar Baba does not count since he was there as a matter of political expediency).

Also, Dr Mahathir's even-handed appointment of Najib and Abdullah as joint-chairmen of the influential Umno disciplinary committee implies his reluctance to show any partiality to one or the other.

Says Ibrahim: "He would have done it by now (appoint a Deputy Prime Minister) if he wanted to, I think he will assign one V-P or another when necessary. It's a wise decision ... that's my humble opinion, from the bottom of my heart."

Politics aside, the Deputy Prime Minister's post is of practical importance in the event of the Prime Minister being suddenly indisposed.

There has to be someone who can immediately take over the reins of state and maintain political stability.

"For those reasons alone, we need a DPM," says Ahmad Shabery.

One possible solution is to appoint an interim Deputy Prime Minister, someone with no long-term ambitions and neutral enough to oversee things until the next party elections.

Some insist that even such a person must have sound credentials because of the difficult economic spell that the country is going through.

"Interim or not, the person must be able to instil confidence," says a member.

The Prime Minister, says Ahmad Shabery, would help ease the burden on Umno delegates if he could send some signals on the choice of successor.

Such signals used to mean a great deal during Umno's earlier years. In 1981, for instance, both Tengku Razaleigh and Musa were vying for the deputy president's post vacated by Dr Mahathir upon succeeding Tun Hussein Onn as president.

A day before the Umno general assembly, Hussein was given the honour of laying the foundation stone for what would eventually be the Putra World Trade Centre.

Hussein reportedly did not speak to Tengku Razaleigh throughout the function nor did he thank him in his speech in spite of the Umno treasurer's role in raising funds for the building.

Then, during his farewell speech at the assembly the next day, he made more references to education (Musa was Education Minister) than the economy (Tengku Razaleigh was Finance Minister).

The signals were not missed by the delegates and Musa beat Tengku Razaleigh to the post.

But transmitting such signals have grown more difficult over the years.

Money talks, as they say, and in the 1993 party elections it spoke so jarringly that the signals sent out by Dr Mahathir against money politics were lost on the delegates.

For a number of years too, Malaysians were fond of pulling out the rather kooky "Rahman formula" to predict the premiership.

"Rahman" stands for the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and the letters in "Rahman" have fitted rather uncannily the initials of Malaysian Prime Ministers to date: "R" for Tunku Abdul Rahman, "A" for Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, "H" for Tun Hussein Onn and "M" for Dr Mahathir.

The "A" that came after "M" was, until recently, thought to have meant Anwar Ibrahim.

One can imagine that Abdullah's admirers would be keen to apply the "Rahman formula" and Najib's supporters less so. Still, all is not lost for Najib. His turn will come since the formula ends with an "N".

But whether one goes by kooky formula or political signals, it ought to be clear by now that whoever is next in line for the premiership must be able to consolidate the party.

The political ripples from Anwar's dramatic exit from Umno, much as Umno people are loathe to admit, have created a crisis of sorts in the party although not of the magnitude evident during the big split of 1987.

Thus, it would help if the next second-in-command has the ability to heal rifts and bring about a new fusion.

"The real threat to Umno is Pas, so the person must also be able to handle Pas," adds Ahmad Shabery.

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