

# It's a guessing game as race for veep posts starts

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He said Dr Mahathir who led Barisan Nasional

ice-president's posts appears to have started although the date for the party polls has yet to be set.

Given the present situation in the party and its performance in the recent general election, the next line-up of vice-presidents can be anybody's guess.

However, one thing looks certain. Umno will continue to be led by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for now.

The Prime Minister and Umno president stated last

week that he would defend his post if he was re-nominated.

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"As the incumbent who has provided the party with a strong and able leadership, he is eminently qualified to offer his services for another term," said Umno Youth secretary Zulkifli Alwi.

He said Dr Mahathir who led Barisan Nasional

to victory in the general election, had a fresh mandate to lead Malaysia in the new millennium.

"And in this context, the Umno presidency is a critical base from which to govern the country," Zulkifli added.

Other party leaders pointed out that Dr Mahathir had also spoken of a new generation of Umno leaders taking over the helm.

The party president, they said, had stressed that the transition of power must be made in accordance with Umno rules, without weakening the party.

Observers said that the options are clear for Dr Mahathir. He could complete his three-year term as president, a post he has held since 1981, or let his deputy take over midway to allow the next leader to prepare for the next general election.

Much attention will also be on the deputy president's post.

Most members see Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as the likely, if not the sole candidate.

Abdullah was elected vice-president with the second highest number of votes in the 1996 party

polls along with Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, who has since taken leave from his duties.

Abdullah assumed the job of deputy president following the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim from the party.

Supreme council member Datuk Wira Mohamed Ali Rustam has proposed that there be no contest for the two top posts.

"It is vital that the Prime Minister and his deputy

are returned unopposed," he said.

Other party leaders felt that Umno would have to look beyond the question of party posts and make changes to keep itself in step with the peoples' aspirations.

They said changes should include adopting new approaches in the party's political structure and style of campaigning.

"We have to make Umno attractive to young Malay professionals and the middle-class," said one leader.

"Changes must result in winning back the hearts and minds of civil servants and academicians."

Former Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said unity should be the rallying cry because the results of the last general election showed that Umno was facing a serious challenge.

"We need to create a strong impression among the Malays that Umno is still relevant. We have to do this for the sake of our future," he said.

"We have to accept the fact that some of us have been arrogant, believing that we could do anything we liked as if we would always be in power. This must change and we must strive for improvement."