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All eyes on Umno mega event

Joceline Tan

FOR weeks, they have been treated and feted like VVIPs (Very, Very Important Persons). They are the delegates to the 54th Umno general assembly and they will begin flooding into the capital from all over Malaysia from tomorrow.

By the time these VVIPs check into their hotels (no less than five-star status), it is probable that every single one of them would have been contacted - personally or by telephone - for their votes and support by candidates vying for posts in the party election.

"No delegate has been left out. We have the list of delegates in every division and State and we have called all of them ... everyone. Nothing is left to chance," said a supporter of a supreme council candidate.

The above supreme council candidate, a stickler for rules, had opted for telephone campaigning because he wanted to avoid the soliciting of funds that tends to arise in face-to-face campaigning.

As a result, his campaigners have made "thousands of calls" to the "G5" (top five office-bearers who automatically qualify as delegates) and "G7" (seven elected delegates) of all 165 divisions.

And because of this candidate's policy of not leaving anything to chance, calls have also been made to any non-delegate whom they think can influence the delegates' choice of candidate.

It must have been a fascinating, if not amusing, time for delegates to have Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Menteri Besar - big shots whom they would normally have to wait weeks to speak to and even longer to meet - calling and courting them for votes.

As for the less scrupulous ones, it has probably been a lucrative experience, or what the Malays know as durian runtuh (windfall).

This campaign, unfortunately, has seen the good, the bad and the ugly of party politics.

And like it or not, the next few days will see an intense, final spurt of activity to clinch the vote among those who are still undecided as well as to seal the vote among those who have.

But the prevailing view is that by the time the delegates arrive in Kuala Lumpur, they would have made up their minds on the candidates of their choice - from the power-packed vice-presidents' race to the highly-competitive supreme council posts.

The delegates have become extremely well-informed, shrewd even, after what has been an exhaustive election campaign.

"I decided two weeks ago. But 10 per cent of my mind is still open ... depends on what I see and hear the next few days," said Kelantan delegate Datuk Rozali Isohak when contacted in Kota Baru.

Said a well-connected Malay businessman: "Most delegates know who they want for two of the three VPs."

The third name to make it will depend on what many think will be an indication of sorts from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his May 11 presidential address.

Final hour campaigning and, sad to say, inducements can also sway the outcome among the less decided and this will likely take place once the delegates check into their hotels.

Thus, apart from a comprehensive list of delegates, campaign operatives are now finalising their list of where different delegates are putting up in Kuala Lumpur, their room numbers and even their flight numbers so that

the campaign can start at the airport itself.

And once the delegates check in at their hotels, the room-to-room calls and visits begin, ostensibly to convey greetings from the candidates and always asking delegates not to forget their man on the big day.

Most Umno people see nothing wrong with such campaigning, but they worry there will be another splurge of "hard cash in white envelopes".

Name cards complete with colour photos have always been the rage among the lesser candidates and this final lap will see a new round of name cards, freshly printed with the ballot numbers of the candidates.

An aide to a Minister calls them "forget-me-not cards".

A Selangor delegate who has amassed a stack of such cards said he had somehow ended with up to more than a dozen name cards for several candidates.

"It shows how many rounds some of these guys have gone in their campaign," he said.

But one candidate said he was truly taken aback to discover that some delegates have even taken to printing name cards announcing themselves as "delegate".

The same candidate has also received letters from delegates asking for donations for "youth activities" in their division. The letters even enclose the bank account numbers of the "youth club".

"I keep all the letters. I want to keep track of who they are," said the candidate.

Apparently, some delegates already in the city - the very ones whom Dr Mahathir has ordered in no uncertain terms to go home and return only on May 9 - have even taken to wearing tags announcing their delegate status as they lepak in the lobbies and coffeehouses of certain hotels.

Hotels located close to the Putra World Trade Centre have been solidly booked since the date for the assembly was announced.

The Sabah delegation is usually booked into the Legend Hotel, Johor at the Dynasty Hotel, Perak and Penang at the Pan Pacific, Negri Sembilan at the KL Hilton and Kelantan at the Grand Continental and Istana Hotel. The Pahang group is said to be rooming at the truly upmarket Ritz-Calton.

Observers - there will be several thousands - are put up at more down-market places.

According to the above ministerial aide, an uncle of his is among about 30 observers from a division in Perak coming for the assembly.

"He told me that transport, hotel, food and even pocket money is being taken care of by someone who is planning to contest for the top division post next year," he said.

The aide described the move as "strategic planning". And that's Umno politics for you - it never sleeps.

The action of a portion of unscrupulous delegates, said supreme council candidate Datuk Azim Zabidi, should not be taken to reflect the attitude of the rest.

"Umno is a big party and there are bound to be some bad-hats. The majority are decent people who want the best for the party and the Malays," he said.

Others like Mersing divisional head Dr Latiff Ahmad claimed that only 10 per cent of Umno can be swayed by money. Another 20 per cent tend to select candidates they know well or are familiar with.

"But the bulk - 70 per cent - will make their assessment based on quality. That is the thinking part of Umno," said Dr Latiff who is also Deputy Human Resources Minister.

But campaigning aside, there is much anticipation among candidates about the party president's pre-council address on the afternoon of May 9.

Although basically meant for divisional leaders and above, the hall is

often filled to the brim with the rest of the delegates and even observers, all keyed-up for any hint or indication from the president on the election.

Dr Mahathir is likely to make one of his strongest attacks ever against money politics in Umno.

When supreme council candidates gathered at his Putrajaya house last Friday, he had told them, in a reference to his tearful episode in 1996, that he was not going to shed any tears over money politics this time. Instead, he said he was more likely to get angry.

The party president felt he had done his utmost to stop the practice, and told them they had to do their part now.

Some claim the president may even name those who have indulged in money politics, but supreme council candidate and Rural Development Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid said "PM does not talk about who to elect or not to elect".

"But the session is always useful as a guide on what to do and what not to do," he added.

The pre-council session and the presidential address a day later always carries clout among delegates. For instance, his strong stand against the way money was used in 1996 was believed to have ferried in "Mr Clean", Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as the VP with the second-most votes.

Dr Mahathir is said to have been working on his presidential address for about a month now and many expect it to be a straight-from-the-cuff speech that will provide clear-cut signals to delegates about the sort of leadership necessary for the survival and future of Umno.

In fact, both the president and deputy president are expected to prick the conscience of delegates so that they will pick only candidates who can lead Umno through this very challenging times.

The fact that this general assembly is taking place on May 11, the founding date of Umno, has not been lost on those present.

The point is, amid all the publicity about unconscionable campaign practices, there is an undeniable sense of urgency among both candidates and delegates about this year's party election.

It has to do with the fact that election will mark the start of the post-Mahathir era and complete the transition process partly in place when Abdullah laid claim to the deputy president's post uncontested.

As supreme council candidate Datuk Azim Zabidi said: "This is the election which will decide whether Umno will continue to be relevant to the Malays. Delegates say they want change and reform ... this is the time to determine all that with their votes."

Or as Deputy Information Minister and incumbent supreme council member Datuk Khalid Yunus put it: "This election will not only determine the future of Umno, but that of the country."

All eyes will be on Umno this week.

* jocelinet@yahoo.com

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