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All the President's Men

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THOUGH he is so unlike his illustrious father, in more ways than one, it was wise of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak to decline to comment on his more-than-good chances of retaining his vice president's post in the Umno presidential election on May 11.

The 2000-odd Umno delegates have a wide range of choice this time around. One or two are credible, if not impressive, and Najib should not depend on his past success. I want him to win - he deserves it; give him a last chance, but he has to impress the delegates more than he ever did before. This could be the watershed in his personal and political history.

Tun Razak was famous for his reticence, never did anything in excess and rarely put a foot wrong. I had to make only one clarification on his statements during the 13 years I worked for him.

Najib is now leading with 93 nominations, followed by Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman (48), Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar (39), Datuk Osu Sukam (26) and Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar (21).

I am back at the United Nations to resume work while at the same time, between meetings, reading about two dull and imperfect candidates for the American presidential election in November. Vice President Al Gore, an advocate of the Malaysian reformasi movement and an international meddler is, as usual, dismally mournful and somnolent. For sure, he will set no American hearts on fire. Texas Governor George W. Bush, his Republican opponent, is a typical Texan oilman - he uses cheap energy as one of his campaign themes and may follow an isolationist foreign policy or "fortress America" foreign policy if he wins. Bad news for the UN.

Both candidates have celebrated fathers. As a US Senator's son, Gore, like Bush, has been groomed to hold high office in American politics. Indeed, no less than the US presidency itself. As he draws closer to the moment, he can no longer afford to make further major mistakes as he often did - a tendency to boast about himself and his achievements. No, the "Love Story" was not based on his romance with "Tipper" (Mrs Gore). He certainly did not invent the Internet, though he was the first Senator (Democrat or Republican) to promote it.

Gore lacks Mr Bill Clinton's intelligence, political and communications skills and warmth, especially among women. However, he is devoid of Clinton's many moral faults. A boring politician.

In politics, as in business and diplomacy, one must never be over-optimistic. None should count their chickens before they are hatched. The nominations have to be translated into votes. I can testify anywhere that the Umno presidential elections have always been professionally and scrupulously run. Voting has always been secret.

I know all the aspiring heirs to Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi. As readers would have guessed, I know Najib better than all the others. Set against them, Najib has longer and more varied experience in government at both federal and state levels. He does seem a prime material for higher office if his talents and energies are properly channelled.

The May 11 poll - whether one likes it or not - will hinge on "character, integrity and the candidates' potential, and approachability". What have they learned or did not, following the last general election? As campaigning draws to a close, I hope to write sketches of the candidates. As an Umno card-carrying member and a Malaysian, I am not deeply troubled about this intense Umno war of succession. It is a do-or-die race for one

or two candidates which makes the war interesting, notwithstanding the fact that the results are quite predictable.

Najib, Ghani, Abu Hassan and Osu appear to be winning the hearts of Umno delegates. They are advancing steadily. Ghani and Osu, in particular, are travelling on a fast lane. Their decision to join the race, like that of Abu Hassan, is timely and good judgement.

Long before the near-tragedy at Pekan, Najib lost a good chance to move mountains. He held the supremely influential ministry of education - his father's first ministerial appointment (1955-59) - for a decent period. What went wrong, asked an influential royal. I had no answer to give him except to retell the story of Tun Razak. The Pahang Tunku was overseas and apolitical during Tun Razak's days.

I told him: "When in Pekan, Tun Razak always stayed at his balai, a modest kampung house in Peramu on the left bank of Pahang river (now a cottage industry centre) or at the old resthouse by the town padang before he could afford to build the balai; never failed to visit friends and relatives or they called on him; would send me or other staff periodically to check on the Pekan constituency which then included the present Rompin parliamentary constituency and Pulau Tioman. He also had good state assemblymen. Tun Razak, though Prime Minister (and before that Deputy Prime Minister at age 35) never used police outriders when visiting the kampungs.

I never knew Pahang as well as I did until I became Tun Razak's aide for 13 years (1963-76) though I had many friends from Pahang at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, including two classmates.

Pekan in 1963 was an excellent example of a Malay royal township: it might have lacked many things but it possessed the quiet Malay dignity combined with the robust sense of friendship and hospitality and a rather peculiar sense of humour which I enjoyed and felt much at ease with. I loved going to Pekan, especially during the Sultan's birthday celebrations to participate in parties and games - the menuba or "fish drive" in the Pahang river in particular.

With every day that passes (until May 11), all candidates vying for the posts must look more like the President's men or like themselves. If Najib and the others keep saying the right things, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad does, with conviction, the delegates will have a tough time picking the "three vice-heirs", one of whom will eventually be Abdullah's heir when he takes over from Dr Mahathir, whenever that may be.

A prime minister has to carefully evaluate what his choice of a deputy brings to him, to the party and the nation. A prime minister rarely denies his deputy succession unless for a good and compelling reason.

The deputy's moral fibre, the advice and good counsel he may be able to offer the prime minister (this, of course, depends on the quality of the deputy's own so-called advisers) and, occasionally, the game of geographical politics determine who gets what. All senior appointments in government and Umno, I know, reflect the holders' relationship with the leader of the party - whether he is comfortable with the appointees.

I know for sure that if an equivalent of the Public Service Commission (during the good old days) interview or the rigorous selection process of Shell or Exxon is applied in politics, Tun Ghafar Baba and many others would not have passed.

But in the end, what matters, in my view, should be a candidate's skill, political courage and determination to deliver - factors that cannot be gauged until it too late.

To be sure, the delegates have made mistakes before: poor performance has grounded one who seemed like a workhorse, misjudgments have hastened a premature retirement of another. A third was sacked for alleged sexual

misbehaviour.

After Abdullah, Najib, Ghani, Abu Hassan, Osu, Syed Hamid Albar, Dr Rais Yatim and Hishamuddin Hussein, the fate of Umno depends on them. They all need to assemble some good advisers - quick.

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