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Ball still very much in Razaleigh's court as vote hunting season begins

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A RARITY no doubt, but nondescript Tawau managed to hit the front pages of mainstream newspapers on Friday when its Umno division became the first of the 165 to hold its meeting.

That's the prize one gets for being the first, especially when it involves the high stakes of Umno's political power play which in essence will determine the direction of the country's leadership.

And that is actually what the focus is all about on Tawau - who will it nominate for the top posts, especially for the presidency and his deputy. As it turned out, the Tawau division went along with the supreme council decision of no contest for the top two posts and nominated Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as president and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as deputy.

That's that. The attention on Tawau will dissipate when other divisions begin holding their meetings. Then, some divisions from other obscure places may get to hog the limelight especially if any of them decide to take a different path than Tawau and nominate Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah for the deputy presidency as is being widely speculated. In fact, this year's Umno general assembly has been reduced to much speculation as to whether Tengku Razaleigh will go for it or not.

The hype had started as early as during the run-up to last year's general election when Tengku Razaleigh was leading the Umno campaign in Kelantan.

To his supporters, if he had managed to wrest Kelantan from Pas' stranglehold, Tengku Razaleigh would have been in a strong position for the deputy president's post, which became vacant following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. But the dream did not come true. Umno lost Kelantan and with that, many viewed it as a setback to Tengku Razaleigh's hopes of going for the number two post and winning it. If that was not enough, the supreme council decision in January which advised divisions to support a no contest resolution for the top two posts seemed to further dash any hopes Tengku Razaleigh and his supporters may harbour for his imminent rise in the Umno ranks.

Yet, the speculation that Tengku Razaleigh will go for the deputy presidency did not end. If anything, it grew stronger as the deadline for the division meetings drew nearer.

Tengku Razaleigh did not help to quell the speculation either when he chose to be quite "evasive" on his plans for the Umno elections.

Then came the barrage of political justifications as to why Tengku Razaleigh should or should not go for the deputy presidency.

Many have argued that the no contest advice from the supreme council is a dereliction from democratic practices and stifles the freedom of choice among the divisions.

Some pointed out that Abdullah will not attain the legitimacy to the deputy president's post if he did not win it in an election as he was not the incumbent.

For others, it is merely perceived as a horse race without any thoughts to whether it augurs well for the party or otherwise. At the same time, those who used the argument of wanting democracy to prevail were themselves not known to be practitioners of democratic principles. Going back to the 1993 party elections when there were contests for almost all posts, from the deputy president downwards and it was carried out in the

name of democracy.

Yet they used undemocratic means and that election saw the pinnacle of money politics in the history of Umno elections.

Amid all these, the list of arguments for and against the contest grows as the day passes.

By the time Tawau held its meeting, there was much anticipation that some divisions might just decide to nominate Tengku Razaleigh for deputy president against the advice of the supreme council.

From today when a significant number of divisions hold their meetings, political pundits and supporters of both Abdullah and Tengku Razaleigh will be keeping tabs on the nominations.

If a few decide to cast their nominations in Tengku Razaleigh's way, it can open the floodgates but if none does, the trend may continue with the rest of the remaining divisions.

These nominations are important as the supreme council has imposed the ruling that any candidate vying for any post in the supreme council must secure a certain percentage of nominations to be eligible. For the president's post, a candidate must secure 30 per cent of nominations which comes to about 50 divisions out of the 165. For the deputy presidency, eligibility is 20 per cent which means the candidate must have nominations from 33 divisions.

To be eligible to contest for a vice-president's post, a candidate must secure 15 per cent and it is 10 per cent for a supreme council seat.

These rulings are seen as one of the reasons why Tengku Razaleigh had not made a firm commitment to his plans in the party elections.

For one, if he were to announce his preparedness to contest and he failed to secure the nominations, then he would have to deal with the fact that he had gone against the supreme council's advice.

However, if there are enough nominations for him from the divisions, then he can accept them and move on to challenge Abdullah. This will reduce the perception that he is going against the supreme council advice as he can claim he is only responding to the aspirations of divisions.

But there are too much ifs in Tengku Razaleigh's intention.

To make the situation more interesting, three Mentriss Besar have come forward to propose that Tengku Razaleigh be nominated for vice-president. It may just be the necessary compromise to resolve the predicament faced by some divisions which want a no-contest yet at the same time want Tengku Razaleigh to be among the top Umno leadership.

At the same time, the proposal, if taken up may open the floodgates for many divisions, which had earlier planned to nominate Tengku Razaleigh for the deputy president's post, but would then instead nominate him for vice-president.

The ball is still at Tengku Razaleigh's feet. He can choose to announce that he was agreeable to the proposal by the Mentriss Besar or keep mum and float along the divisional tide. Either way, the final decision is in the hands of the divisions, no matter how nondescript a place they may roost in. Their nominations will give them the lustre, at least during this vote-hunting season.

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