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Delegates show will of their own

Joceline Tan

A WEEK before the Padang Besar Umno division held its annual general meeting, the division's committee held a pre-AGM meeting.

Midway through the meeting, division chairman and Rural Development Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid suggested that the committee come up with a recommended list of nominations to be put to the floor the following weekend.

He handed out slips of paper on which committee members jotted down their choice of candidates for posts starting from the permanent chairman, down to the supreme council. When the slips came back, Azmi was not suprised to find that the entire committee had stuck to the supreme council's advice on the posts of president and deputy president.

The committee also proposed Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar for vice-presidents (in that order) and 25 names for the supreme council.

The above might sound like "fixing" to most people, but the point is that those who eventually decide on the nominations often demonstrate wills of their own.

And that was what happened - to a certain extent, anyway - when the Padang Besar AGM took place last Sunday.

There was no dispute over the two top posts because when the meeting's chairman asked whether there were nominations apart from those for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a thunderous "Tidak!" rose from the floor, followed by long applause.

But when it came to the VPs, the floor added three more nominations to the committee's list although when a vote was called, the same three names were returned but in different order - Najib, Syed Hamid and Ghani.

Delegates also topped up the committee's preferred names for the supreme council with another seven nominations, including Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. The members, says Azmi, had observed their chairman's appeal regarding the no-contest advice, exerted their will on the VP and supreme council races, and ignored their Menteri Besar's suggestion to nominate Razaleigh for vice-president.

"Leaders can influence, but ultimately, members decide," says Azmi.

The above scenario is not an isolated one. This co-mingling of views from the top and bottom has been played out in varying versions at other divisional AGMs in the past weeks.

At the AGM in an urban division in Selangor recently, three names were put forward by the divisional leadership for the vice-presidential race with a plea that delegates vote in only one nominee from Selangor.

But the delegates went ahead to nominate six names before voting in incumbents Najib and both the former and current Selangor Menteris Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar - in that order.

Said one of those present at the meeting: "I thought they would be all worked up about the contests and Umno's political future, but they seemed more concerned about discussing things like banning obscene books, stopping Muslims from going to nightclubs and discos and how Malay women must wear the tudung."

The Padang Terap division in Kedah was widely expected to nominate Razaleigh for one of the two top posts. There was a proposal to put him up for the post of deputy president but to most people's astonishment, it

floundered for want of a seconder.

To date, Tanah Merah in Kelantan stands alone in its dual nomination of the Kelantan prince for the No. 1 and No. 2 posts.

The dice, most say, has been cast although half of the 165 divisions have yet to meet.

"Tengku Razaleigh has missed the boat," says Mersing division head and Deputy Human Resources Minister Dr Abdul Latiff Ahmad.

"Because he didn't say anything, he has lost everything," adds Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

A former Menteri Besar puts it this way: "The fight begins from the nomination stage. If you want to win, you've got to start fighting from the beginning. By now, you should have garnered enough votes to set the ball rolling."

So what happened? Is Razaleigh to blame for not being more explicit about his intentions or is there, as some claim, a culture of fear deterring people from nominating him?

"Look, there is no fear or coercion. I've been going around and meeting so many people and it's very simple... this is politics and politicians will always want to run with the winner," says Umno Youth's Abdul Azim Mohd Zabidi.

The power of incumbency is formidable, thus, the challenger has to work doubly hard to make it, to convince people he is more qualified for the post.

And, given the materialistic trend in politics these days, he has to cut deals with political warlords who can deliver votes.

Yet, Razaleigh has left it to the grassroots to decide what they wish of him. This is the way, he says, things were done in the old days and the glory years of Umno.

But these are not the old days. The Malays have changed and so has Umno. Leaders cannot hope to reach out to Umno members if they continue to speak the old language.

The rules of the game have changed and one cannot snub the rules if one wishes to stay in the game.

Razaleigh's restraint has surprised many, especially those who have known him from before.

One of them told Dr Abdul Latiff: "How come Ku Li is behaving like (Tan Sri) Musa (Hitam)... talking in that roundabout way. The old Ku Li was straight-talking and bold."

There are several possible reasons for his reticence.

One is his reluctance to be seen - again - as the aggressor after the turmoil sparked off by his 1987 challenge of Dr Mahathir, and particularly since it was Dr Mahathir who opened the door to let him back into Umno several years ago.

The Umno rank and file cannot help but view him as ungrateful, and overly ambitious, if he comes out too aggressively now.

Then there is the fact that he had not only failed to deliver his home State but the Kelantan BN fared even worse in the polls in spite of his claim that 400,000 ex-Semangat 46 people had rejoined Umno.

"Tengku Razaleigh is unsure of himself. That's why he is waiting for the signal. But a good leader must always give the signal," says Dr Abdul Latiff.

The only thing he had going for him really is the fact that the disgruntled segment of Umno sees him as their best bet to correct what they think is wrong with Umno.

But as the results of the divisional meetings continue to filter in, it appears that this disgruntled group is much smaller, or perhaps not as risk-taking, as some had imagined.

"Ku Li has his support but a new generation has emerged within Umno in the years when he was outside Umno," says Azim.

Since their return, Razaleigh and other ex-Semangat 46 leaders, including Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, have been unable to re-establish the vast linkages that had helped them rise through Umno.

Moreover, much as Umno people, including those who knew and admired him from the pre-1987 days, believe he has much to contribute to the party, they somehow find it hard to reconcile themselves to having him right up there.

A great deal of it has to do with the years he spent outside Umno and the things he said about Umno. This is an important factor - loyalty and continuity in the party - and it is being underscored by the way nominations are piling up for Najib whom some had thought would be hampered by his narrow win in the general election.

"People want to see stability, how to strengthen the party and unite the grassroots. At the same time they want to send a message to the top, that Umno has to change with the times.

"But I don't think Malays in Umno want anything too drastic at this politically difficult point in time. I personally want to see a smooth transition," says former Umno Youth strongman and Bagan Datoh division chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

This is something people outside of Umno, especially those who subscribe to the liberal democratic tradition, find hard to comprehend.

But the last general election has dealt a serious blow to the confidence and self-esteem of Umno leaders. Many of them go around saying in all seriousness that "the future of Umno is at stake".

"It's better to opt for consensus when times are rough," says a Kedah Youth figure.

"If there's any fear, it's the fear of further weakening the party," adds Azmi.

The same, it is said, applies to the vice-presidential race where former VP Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin claims certain aspirants are being blocked from being nominated.

Notwithstanding Muhyiddin's role during the Wawasan Team episode of 1993, the VP contest is very much about horse-trading. Candidates not only canvass, but negotiate for votes among one another and with other power-brokers.

And it helps if the candidate is a State liaison chairman because then he holds sway over divisions and party figures in the State and has more goods to trade.

Besides, says an aide to a Minister, "that's what politics is about... you try to choke off your opponent".

Candidates like Muhyiddin, Rais and Syed Hamid find they have less barter clout because even though they are Ministers, their kingdoms rarely extend beyond their individual divisions.

Those now trailing Najib must understand that he has been in a position of power longer than any of them, and in many capacities - Menteri Besar, Minister, Umno Youth leader and VP.

The Youth connection has been particularly useful for Najib because the wing often shows the most energy in campaigning.

Zahid, for instance, has come to be seen as some sort of power-broker because of his previous Youth clout and many candidates are said to have approached him for help.

And now that expectation of a contest for the top posts seems to have fizzled out, the focus will be on the VP race for, as Dr Abdul Latiff puts it, "delegates equate the VP race to picking the future DPM or PM".

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