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Umno-Election

ELECTION FEVER AS UMNO'S DIVISIONAL MEETINGS GET UNDERWAY

By: Ahmad Fuad Yahya

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 15 (Bernama) -- Election fever is here again, six weeks after the general election, as Umno branch and divisional meetings get underway from tomorrow.

The meetings at some 6,000 branches and 165 divisions, the party's grass roots, will take two months to complete ahead of the party's general assembly and polls in May.

Branches are given until Feb 29 to hold their meetings while the divisional meetings are from March 1 to April 30.

The election for seats in the decision-making supreme council has been set on May 11 -- day one of the three-day general assembly. The election, originally due last year, was deferred to this year to enable Umno to concentrate on the Nov 29 general election.

Although there will not be any election at the branch and divisional levels this time, the meetings are crucial because it will determine the nominations for the supreme council election and the 2,000 delegates who will vote in the party polls.

The delegates will represent about 2.7 million party members to elect the Umno leadership for another three-year term.

Members are required to get at least 30 per cent of the nominations from Umno divisions to qualify for contest for the president's post, 25 per cent for the deputy president's post, 20 per cent for the vice president's post and 10 per cent for the supreme council member posts.

But with the president and deputy's president posts unlikely to be contested, the focus of the party election has shifted to the fight for the three vice-president's slots.

This scenario came in the wake of the supreme council's decision to ask the divisions to renominate Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for the No 1 and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for the No 2 posts in Umno, the dominant party in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

Over the last few weeks, several cabinet ministers, have given the signal that they are going for the vice presidency, the third most senior position in the party, including incumbent Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who is defence minister.

The others are Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim.

Other aspirants for the No 3 slots are Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, a former vice-president, and Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman.

It is still uncertain whether former Selangor Menteri Besar and incumbent V-P Tan Sri Muhammad Muhamad Taib will defend his post.

Muhammad has been on leave since 1997 from performing his duties as vice president to enable him to sort out some legal problems.

The election for the Umno Youth and Wanita chiefs on May 10 is also another interesting event prior to the party general assembly.

Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein who is acting chief of the Umno Youth is expected to contest the post, left vacant by Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi who resigned.

So far there has not been any indication that Hishammuddin will be challenged.

A contest for the Wanita Umno chief is however expected with Wanita

Umno vice head Datuk Napsiah Omar expected to challenge incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman in the election.

It could also turn out to be a three-corner fight as former Wanita chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, whom Dr Siti Zaharah defeated in 1996, said yesterday she was still considering whether to join the contest.

Apart from party elections, the other main attraction foreshadowing the Umno general assembly is the debate on the party's performance in the Nov 29 general election, which saw Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) making inroads into the Malay heartland states, once the stronghold of Umno.

PAS retained Kelantan and captured Terengganu from the BN while substantially increasing its parliamentary and state legislative assembly seats, mostly at Umno's expense.

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