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Focus shifts to VP race

Abdul Razak Abu Chik

FOR THE next two months, the Malaysian capital markets will have to make do without the financial lift from one Ms Chua Lee Hoong from across the Causeway. Ms Chua, most of us know by now, is a columnist in the employ of the Singapore Straits Times. She is so worried about the Umno succession scramble that she has decided not to put her money in Malaysia for the moment. She contends that 'infighting' within Umno is a major issue in the stability of the local investment environment.

Paradoxically, it is the stability of Umno for the past 18 years and the tradition of consensus - which looks set to continue in the May 11 party General Assembly - that is the bone of her contention. It led to her frothy denigration in her newspaper column of both party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Umno's political longevity with her immortally tactless phrase; 'both top dog and ruling party remained unchanged'.

The 'insightful' Ms Chua should not be entirely faulted, though, as her column was published in the Straits Times on March 24. The itch to comment must have welled up in the weeks prior when Beluran hardly figured in her calculations. Beluran? Yes, Beluran - the Sabah Umno division which held its delegates meeting on March 27 and nominated Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to contest the deputy presidency. This endorsement brought his tally to 133 nominations, putting an end to the race for the party's Number Two. Much earlier ... much, much earlier, Dr Mahathir secured the requisite number of nominations for the post of party president. The race for the post of Youth chief is also over with Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein securing 164 nominations. Instability, Ms Chua?

But Malaysians are nothing if not generous. So, let us be magnanimous and grant Ms Chua her journalistic licence. Perhaps, she is mightily concerned that the race for the vice-presidency and the Wanita wing is still open. The personalities involved bring added 'spice' to the contest. The fate of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah is very much up in the balance. He is still in the running for nomination to contest one of the three vice-presidencies at the General Assembly, although it does appear he is very much a laggard in the race.

There's been mixed reactions to Razaleigh's return to the fold. Many feel that he would have wielded more clout in this nomination process had he delivered Kelantan in the last general election. Political pundits even dared speculate that he would have sufficient support to challenge party president Dr Mahathir himself! The Kelantan prince's equivocal statements early on in response to questions of 'Will you?' or 'Won't you?' only fuelled speculation of his true intentions. Many feel had he taken a stand to seek nomination for the vice-presidency, sizeable support and nominations would have gone his way. Some go further to say he stood to have profited even more had he aspired to contest for higher positions - if only he had brought himself to say so.

The latest statement from Razaleigh should, however, leave no one in any doubt over where he stands. Speaking at the Gua Musang Umno division delegates meeting at the end of March, he said; 'Let us accept the new Umno leadership.' He went on to state that he had no intention of contesting for any high office in the party now despite being pressured to do so.

The ball is firmly in his court in more ways than one, following the

penultimate round of divisional meetings in the first week of April. Razaleigh holds the 'casting' vote since all it now needs is for his own Gua Musang division to name its choice of nominees for the vice-presidency. Having garnered 16 nominations by April 9, he needs one more to qualify. Intriguingly, the Prince is Gua Musang division chief! So, if there's any 'sparks' at all to come, it will have to come from the women's wing. The cili padi sting, in more ways than one, is the contest for leadership of the Wanita wing. Up to April 9, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz had garnered the most nominations (92) against incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman (73) - one strongwoman against an even strongerwoman, the award of the epithet left to one's own professional allegiance or personal prejudice. For Rafidah's supporters, her defeat to Siti Zaharah in the last General Assembly still rankles. After winning by a narrow margin, Siti Zaharah exercised her prerogative by not giving Rafidah a seat on the Wanita executive committee. Rafidah did not endear herself to Siti Zaharah's camp for the less-than-gracious way in which she took her defeat. Watch this one sizzle!

Not that the nomination action elsewhere was in any way good-natured. While some division meetings were conducted with orderly good manners, others were hardly the model for decorous behaviour. Some of the action was downright infantile with one division disruption put down to a sulphurous discharge commonly associated with rotten eggs. There was a walkout, reports of verbal harangue and the sighting of several unwarranted flying objects.

The race for the vice-presidency has seen one contender - Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin - crying foul. The Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister claimed that the way Umno divisional meetings were being conducted hampered his chances of nomination. His ire is understandable. Coming from the state of Johor, he has to contend with two other candidates for the vice-presidency - Foreign Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar and Mentri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman. Muhyiddin claimed early results showed a pattern which did not favour him which he put down to delegates voting along guidelines set by the state party leadership. As candidates are barred from campaigning, the path towards nomination is a lot breezier for the Mentri Besar who has unfettered access to the whole state, going about his daily business.

That discordant note was quickly doused by a simple assurance from Dr Mahathir that there was no such directive given to delegates to influence the way their vote went. Interestingly, Muhyiddin got the nod from Kubang Pasu - Dr Mahathir's division - which nominated him as one of the three candidates for the vice-presidency!

So come May 11, when the party bandwagon rolls on to the Putra World Trade Centre to decide the future of Umno and the nation, it is most likely going to be *deja vu* for the delegates yet again. Despite the turmoil of the past year, Umno appears more united than ever. Dr Mahathir loves to use the Malay adage *mengeluar rambut dari tepung* (removing a strand of hair from flour) to rally members to unity. Speaking at the Kubang Pasu Umno division delegates meeting of which he is chairman, he said; 'For some people it is alright to retrieve the strand of hair and spill the flour in the process in the name of democracy.' Delegates are known to value their *tepung*. The outcome is quite forgone. Ms Chua's millions is there for the picking as this Umno election, like so many before, is one contest that never was.