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Guessing game continues on who will sit in Selangor's hot seat

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SELANGOR has been without a Menteri Besar for five days and the guessing game on who is going to fill in the "hot seat" continues.

Attention on the possible candidates to succeed Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar has so far been centred on the 11 Assemblymen whose names were endorsed by the State Umno liaison committee and submitted to the Prime Minister on Friday.

Over the weekend, the field is said to have been narrowed down to only two candidates - Deputy Menteri Besar Datuk Dr Zainal Abidin Ahmad and Exco member Datuk Ahmad Mokhtar Dahalan.

How the other nine got eliminated from the list is not clear. Similarly, how Zainal Abidin - besides being the Deputy Menteri Besar - and Mokhtar being seen as having the edge over the others is also difficult to fathom.

The wisdom in submitting so many names can also be debated. It gives the impression that Selangor is not short of capable leaders, but it could also demonstrate the failure of the committee to reach a compromise.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in between his tight schedule over the weekend, must have given much thought to choosing the right person since Abu Hassan resigned last Thursday.

A Selangor State Assemblyman said one should never rule out the possibility of Dr Mahathir picking a newcomer, like what he did in 1986 when he appointed Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib over several other senior Assemblymen.

History might repeat itself, he reckoned, stressing that Dr Mahathir himself had said that he might pick the candidate from the list given to him or other names he thought suitable.

The Assemblyman said it was difficult to ignore the fact that nine of the 11 Assemblymen proposed as Menteri Besar were around in 1997 when Dr Mahathir was confronted with the dilemma in choosing the replacement for Muhammad, who had to relinquish the post after a currency offence in Australia.

"If these Assemblymen were MB material, then Dr Mahathir would not have resorted to holding a by-election to appoint Abu Hassan," he said, referring to the "manoeuvre" in 1997 when Abu Hassan resigned as a Federal Minister to contest a by-election before assuming the Menteri Besar's post.

Of the other two Assemblymen on the list, only one can be considered a newcomer - Hulu Bernam Assemblyman Datuk Mohamed Idris Abu Bakar.

The other is Batu Tiga representative Datuk Salamon Salamat, but he had been the Shah Alam MP before contesting a State seat in the last general election.

A source said the newcomers who warranted a closer watch are Sungai Panjang Assemblyman Dr Mohd Khir Toyo and Ahmad Nawawi Zin, the Sungai Renggam Assemblyman.

If Dr Mohd Khir is selected, it would give Umno Youth a big boost as he sits on the movement's executive council.

The source said Selangor needed a young, energetic and dynamic leader to steer it towards attaining its vision of becoming a developed State by 2005, and the two Assemblymen fit in the bill.

Their lack of experience should not be a hindrance. Moreover, the State Umno had already pledged its support to whoever picked by Dr Mahathir as the next MB.

The theory that a by-election will be held to allow either Muhammad or Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Dr Shafie Salleh to contest also seems to have lost its momentum.

It stems partly from the many predictions that holding a by-election, and in Selangor at that, is a bit "risky" now.

When Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he felt a by-election was not necessary, it strengthened the assumption that Shafie and Muhammad were out of the picture.

However, to be fair to Abdullah, he had also said that when it came to picking the new Menteri Besar, it would be the sole prerogative of the Prime Minister.

One cannot totally rule out any by-election as appointing Shafie as Menteri Besar would solve a few problems faced by the Selangor Umno, especially in appeasing supporters of Muhammad, who still wields considerable influence in the State.

Under the proposal, Shafie will vacate his Kuala Langat parliamentary seat to contest the Morib State seat, now held by Datuk Abdul Samad Maharuddin, a former close aide of Muhammad.

Muhammad will, meanwhile, stand in Kuala Langat in a move designed to bring him to the Federal level.

The result of this arrangement will see a more united Umno in Selangor.

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