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High stakes in Umno elections

IT'S politics again. This time it's the Umno elections in mid-May. One can argue with some verve that the build-up to the polls is rather unnerving.

With more than 100 days to go, the build-up is going to be a protracted affair.

It may also be fractious, especially coming at a time when Umno needs some house-cleaning and repairs.

To some, especially those outside the party, it could be irritating to see the amount of media space and time devoted to the build-up.

Yet, a quick check will assuage most people that the elaborate party election process is defensible, even necessary.

Grudgingly or otherwise, a big party like Umno will have to devote months to an election where less than 2,000 people cast their votes in a matter of hours.

In our society, which is flushed with intrigue and shadow play rather than explicit posturing, stories about the Umno election are often well-followed.

In recent weeks, the question most often asked by reporters and observers alike appears to be: "Are you contesting?"

So far, a total of nine candidates have indicated their readiness to be nominated for the vice-presidential post. Of the five VP posts, three are up for grabs while the other two are reserved for the heads of the Youth and Wanita wings.

A candidate will get a morale-boost if his candidacy is backed by a sizeable number of nominations. Whether this number will actually be reflected in winning votes remains to be seen, but it is not uncommon for candidates unable to secure "big" nominations to withdraw from the race.

This Umno election has an "added significance" (note that this phrase has come to be attached to most elections) because it will determine Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's successor.

The Prime Minister and Umno president has said this would be his last term. Against this background, the VP race is choked with aspirants because Dr Mahathir's successor is going to need a deputy.

This person will then be the "presumptive successor".

The stakes are unquestionably high. The Umno supreme council has thus far refrained from meddling in the process, apart from suggesting that the top two posts not be contested.

It has learnt its lesson.

In 1987, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Tan Sri Musa Hitam mounted an unprecedented challenge to the leadership, precipitating in a bitter split.

Some commentators argue that Umno never did fully recover from the 1987 contest, which was narrowly won by Dr Mahathir and Tun Ghafar Baba.

Following his defeat, Tengku Razaleigh formed the now-defunct Parti Melayu Semangat 46. After two unsuccessful attempts to dethrone the Barisan Nasional in the general election, Razaleigh or Ku Li returned to Umno.

On numerous occasions since, he has proclaimed himself a "Gurkha", a party worker whose interest is in unifying work rather than in eyeing the top post.

Looking back, one shudders just to think of the combined strength of the Opposition if Ku Li's party had not been dissolved by the time of Datuk

Seri Anwar Ibrahim's sacking.

Meanwhile, Anwar's departure led to the elevation of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, seen then as Ku Li's ally in Team B.

Blessed with a character built to douse fires rather than starting one, the self-effacing Abdullah has deftly positioned himself as a viable successor.

By sticking to the simple formula of recognising his role as that of a deputy to the Prime Minister, Abdullah has constructed durable bridges within the party without stirring frenzied coverage in the foreign media.

All this time, Ku Li was on the sidelines. He was appointed head of Kelantan Umno, a position earlier held by Dr Mahathir. The move revitalised his profile in the party.

The Gurkha has now acquired a title and a place at Umno supreme council meetings. Ku Li seemingly galvanised the Umno machinery in Kelantan and in the process, depicted himself as a team-worker.

By mid-November 1999, the foreign media started to give him plenty of space. Asiaweek asked in a cover story whether he was the Crown Prince. Far Eastern Economic Review published an article about him in the same week.

But when the election was held, Ku Li's stock plummeted in tandem with Umno's disastrous performance in Kelantan.

It was not lost on the party's rank and file that the party fared markedly better in 1995 when Ku Li was in the Opposition. Admittedly, there was a swing, but that defeat did not further his cause in the bigger picture.

In a flash, Ku Li rushed to re-invent himself, fuelling speculation about his intention vis-a-vis the May 11 elections.

This was palpable by his non-committal stance on the supreme council's no-contest suggestion. He argued that Umno must listen to the younger generation and the feelings of the grassroots - decidedly a populist stance.

Curiously, Ghafar leaped into the picture by somehow aligning himself with Tengku Razaleigh. Thus, someone who heads Kelantan Umno with one MP seat is now being touted as a candidate.

The self-styled Gurkha has since ceased to behave and speak like one. Instead, Ku Li now seems to be marshalling his forces for a possible showdown with Abdullah for the number two post, which he lost to Musa in successive elections in 1981 and 1984.

Questions abound over the presumed challenge that some think Ku Li is contemplating.

When will he declare his bid? Will he actually do it? Does he consider this a last-ditch attempt for the throne? Does rebuilding Kelantan Umno not feature prominently in his list of priorities? Has he admitted defeat in Kelantan? Does he not acknowledge the credentials of Abdullah?

Is he still a Gurkha?

In order to contest the number two post, Ku Li will need at least 33 nominations from the 165 divisions. Meanwhile, Abdullah, never one to outwardly display ambition, continues his gradual rise.

He is saying all the right things, like how he is prepared to face a challenge for the vacant number two post.

Note that in the interim, publicly at least, suggestions on how Umno should stop the rise of Pas have drastically dwindled.

Focus has conveniently shifted to the May 11 contest, eclipsing the fact that some two million new voters will be eligible to vote in the next general election due by 2004.

Like other huge organisations, there will be elements in Umno continuously baying for a big fight. Insiders say big contests are

invariably money-spinners. There is much bidding and cajoling to do.

Sober Umno members are watching this with a studied gaze. Uppermost in their minds is to prevent the party from disintegrating or becoming marginalised in the bigger equation.

Simply put, they would not want to be relegated to the Opposition come the next general election, which makes those who put the party above self, a preferred stock.

It is obvious Umno stands to gain if a leadership challenge fizzles out in the weeks to come. It means the decision not to contest must have been made after much sounding out and testing of the waters, or done in the interest of party unity.

There is also this other intriguing and quite outlandish option which has not gained popularity - a proposal by the Batu Gajah division in Perak that both Ku Li and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak be given VP posts uncontested.

It looks fine except that it will leave eight or more aspirants jostling for the remaining slot.

Are there any other exciting options?

Somewhat gingerly, Umno is faced with the first hurdle in the arduous process of repair and rebuilding.

Ku Li, according to some commentators, triggered the Malay schism of 1987 and beyond. Everyone is now watching his next move at a time when Umno desperately needs to close ranks.

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