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Inclusion of new faces in supreme council augurs well for Umno's future

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APART from being the first to be held outside Kuala Lumpur, the Umno supreme council meeting in Ipoh on Monday came just three days after its 10 appointed members were named, to add to the 25 elected during the party elections in May.

The appointments made public last Friday raised some eyebrows, more so as it was not announced by the party president as had been the tradition.

Speculation will go on as to why a major announcement like this was not made by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad or even the secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob.

This aside, perhaps the most significant development and the one thing that captured the attention of political observers and media alike was the inclusion of many new faces in the party's highest decision-making body.

There were four fresh faces among those appointed - Azalina Othman Said, an ordinary member of the Raja Chulan Umno branch and widely known women's activist, Bank Rakyat chairman and women exco member Dr Norraesah Mohamad, Umno youth information chief Azimi Daim and Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad.

Whatever the reason may be, the point is that the choice has been made and all must accept that it is the prerogative of the party president to choose the team members he would need to lead the party.

An insider said the meeting deliberated on the need for the party to undertake measures to imbue the spirit of Umno in the hearts and minds of the younger generation especially those in institutions of higher learning.

In other words to secure the support of the younger generation which is the party's biggest challenge yet.

If that is the case, then the appointment of Azalina and Azimi was indeed a commendable move by the party leadership in their efforts to get diverse ideas and views from the perspective of the young to attract more youths.

During the meeting which lasted a few hours, said the insider, the discussion and mood was serious, energetic, optimistic and full of commitment from all.

In the course of the deliberation, various measures to bridge the generation gap between the party leadership and young Malaysians to ensure continuing support for the party in preparation for the next general election were discussed in depth.

"Everyone was enthusiastic. This a good start as we feel that everyone should express honest opinions regarding matters that will bring good to the party.

"This scenario bodes well for the future of the party," said an Umno State leader.

He said Dr Mahathir's choice showed that there was a place in the leadership for tried and tested leaders as well as fresh blood and new ideas.

"In choosing the 10 appointed-members, Dr Mahathir would want to gather as much talent as he can."

He said although many had expected more senior party members to sit in the council, there is little to be gained if he only chooses the senior members despite the great deal of political talent there.

However, political observers were quick to point out a few blemishes.

They claimed that many within Umno are still apprehensive on the appointment of the 10.

"In the first place if the party wants to have a representation across the board, why not choose someone like Senator Zainal Rampak, who is president of the Malaysian Trades Union Council."

A veteran Umno leader however was quick to point out that in deciding to appoint new faces, Dr Mahathir has displayed immense political courage.

"The considerations involved in taking such a step were numerous and critical, but he went through with it in the interest of the party's future.

"New faces in Umno reflect the desire for new thinking in the party.

"This might help to infuse a renewed sense of vigour into the movement."

He added that the 10 appointees consisted of men and women whom Dr Mahathir felt were necessary to see the party and the nation through the days ahead, able to grapple with the challenges and capable of making the most of the opportunities.

"The apprehensions some may have on the appointments are misplaced. Dr Mahathir's choice, making full use of experience while bringing in new faces with new energies, I believe will have wide support from Umno members," said the veteran.

On top of that, he said, the appointment of three women representatives to the council also augurs well for the party.

As for the appointment of the various State liaison chairmen, a political analyst said maybe it stood as a timely reminder to the State leaders to show their capacity to solve their internal disputes among themselves.

What Dr Mahathir may be implying, said the analyst, was that the leaders could not expect the people to have confidence in their ability to resolve wider issues if they were not even able to put their own house in order.

"Dr Mahathir clearly had not allowed internal bickering among the leaders to divert his attention from the larger issue of survival now and in the future.

"Whatever the personal and policy differences between the leaders, he expects them to resolve it and make peace with each other."

Citing a Malay proverb, the veteran said : "Tali yang tiga lembar itu tak suang-suang putus." ("A rope of three strands is not easily parted", or literally unity is strength).

"The ball is not in any one person's court.

"For the sake of the party, it is imperative that while views may differ in other respects, there is total agreement that Umno unity must prevail."

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