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Infusion of new blood to bring about rejuvenation, consolidation

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WITH the vice-presidential results and the narrow victory for the Wanita Umno head set to grab headlines in weeks to come, it was heartening to note the clear message delivered by delegates when voting in the supreme council.

Consolidation and rejuvenation were the order of the day's proceedings.

The infusion of new blood in the 25-member council was a clear agenda among voters, who strongly supported first-time candidates like Rural Development Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid and Datuk Mohd Nazri Aziz, a former acting head of Umno Youth.

Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the former Umno Youth leader, also did well in fourth place with 1,370 votes.

Despite his past association with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the Bagan Datoh MP is widely believed to be popular with Umno Youth members.

Other former Umno Youth leaders who won was Datuk Abdul Azim Zabidi, the former exco member and Bank Simpanan Nasional chairman, who is in his first contest for position in the party proper.

Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, a former supreme council member in the 1980s, polled 1,030 votes. He was a candidate endorsed by Johor Umno and looks set to make a comeback into mainstream Umno politics.

Apart from Shahrir, however, the results indicated that the delegates were not as accommodating of the other candidates viewed by some as "not being part of the establishment".

They include Datuk Ishak Ismail, Datuk Ruhanie Ahmad, Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad, Datuk Datuk Fauzi Abdul Rahman and Datuk Dr Affifuddin Omar.

The strong showing by 14 incumbents (of the 21) who managed to retain their the positions would further support the hypothesis that the delegates also voted for continuity within the party.

Senior leaders who rode off into the sunset include Datuk Seri Megat Junid Megat Ayub, Tan Sri Abdul Hamid Pawanteh, Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail and Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik.

Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali managed to gain a respectable third placing along with Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob.

Deputy Chief Ministers Datuk Hilmi Yahya from Penang and Datuk Lajim Ukin of Sabah also won seats.

The party president is empowered to appoint 10 members to the council, and a possibility is that the Menteri Besar candidates who failed in the contest like Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim could be co-opted into the council.

However, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had previously said that co-opting State leaders into the supreme council was just a practice which the party conducted when and if it felt necessary.

The delegates took a pro-active measure to consolidate the party. This could be seen in the strong victories registered by several "strategically important" candidates which the party needs.

Senator Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman came in sixth with 1,341 votes, while Umno information chief Datuk Dr Yusuf Noor polled 1,076 votes.

Although Abdul Hamid lost the general election in the Sik constituency and Yusuf was not fielded last year, many see them as valuable assets in Umno's arsenal against Pas.

Incumbent Datuk Mustapa Mohamed also scored an impressive victory.

Despite his defeat in last year's general election, many feel that the Jeli division chief is still needed to strengthen the team of Kelantan Umno leaders, due to his proven track record as Second Finance Minister.

There was talk on the ground that some of the delegates were upset by the party president's harsh stand on money politics, and would in turn register a message of protest in their votes.

But it did not happen, and it was heartening to note that the close fight for the Wanita head which could result in later problems of closing ranks did not occur.

There was also speculation that major upsets were to be expected following the unexpected results of the vice-presidential contest.

Instead, the delegates' united voice in the choice of the 25 candidates ensured that the council could be depended upon as an anchor which the party could rely on to consolidate itself.

For these two aspirations to be successfully achieved, the party needed a strong team of leaders in the supreme council, as the highest decision-making body of the party is the pool from which its top leaders are drawn.

For delegates, the 25 elected positions in the council represent their aspirations for what they hope the future of the party will be.

From this perspective, the results for the new line-up reveal some indicators on what the composition of the team of top leaders could look like.

With a good mixture of experienced hands and junior mavericks in the council, a bright future looks possible.

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