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Ku Li's call better late than never

TENGGU Razaleigh Hamzah's open call to Umno members to throw their support behind Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi may have come a little late, but it was a clear and crisp message, at least to his supporters within the party. A little late because the former Semangat 46 leader could have said it earlier when he was expected to, by some quarters, to ensure that the Supreme Council's decision not to contest the party's top two posts was adhered to. But late is usually better than never in the Malay psyche and Razaleigh, by expressing faith in the present party leadership, has helped ensure there will be no further divide in the Malay political divide.

Even if Razaleigh had wanted to continue the guessing game he was playing since nominations for party posts started, it would not have been possible for him now to garner an enough number of nominations from the divisions to qualify for the race for the party president and deputy president posts. Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president and Prime Minister, and his deputy, Abdullah, have both secured sufficient nominations to force a no-contest for both posts at Umno's general assembly early next month. It is also highly unlikely that Razaleigh will win enough nominations to run for one of the three vice president posts. His best hope now is to join the fray and try to keep his seat in the Supreme Council. But that is up to him to consider, and up to the delegates to decide.

What is important is that the Kelantan prince has now joined the majority of Umno members who want to see continuity and stability maintained in the succession process of the party leadership. The Supreme Council's decision to pave the way for Dr Mahathir and Abdullah to continue to lead the party took into account the negative consequences of such high-level tussles in the past. Razaleigh himself had stood against Dr Mahathir for the presidency in 1987 and after his defeat, led his supporters out of Umno. For over a decade, the split that followed the mass walkout and later Razaleigh's move to form Semangat 46, had helped the Opposition strengthen their position and manipulate Umno's new weaknesses. Kelantan fell to Pas and last year, Terengganu followed suit. Another attempt by Razaleigh to stand for the presidency against the wishes of the majority of Umno members would have been construed as selfish and an act of sabotage.

The party should use Razaleigh's declaration of support for the president and his deputy to bridge any gap among the membership and the divide among the Malays. Razaleigh himself must feel compelled to play a bigger role to do this. His remarks to his supporters in Gua Musang must be matched by tangible efforts to explain why the Supreme Council decided against contests for the two top positions in the party. This would also justify his coming back to the party's fold after the damage done following the 1987 incident in Umno.

There is much work to be done by Umno and while some critics from some neighbouring countries may feel that there should have been a leadership change, Malaysians, and now the Umno members through their respective divisions, have once again given Dr Mahathir the mandate to lead them through the new millennium. Perhaps it is because he has successfully brought the economy out recession faster than they themselves believed anyone could, or perhaps they see no future in the alternatives which have

availed themselves. For certain, most Malaysians know that change for the sake of change does not usually bring improvement. The frequent leadership changes in Japan and the so-called revolution in another neighbouring country show that there could be more harm done.

It is crucial at this point for Umno to ensure a smooth succession of power. Which was why Razaleigh's belated expressed support for the no-contest decision by the Supreme Council had caused much anxiety and, by the same token, why there should be so much relief greeting his call in Gua Musang for his supporters and for all Umno members to rally behind the president and the deputy president.

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