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Looking for bright and fresh faces

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FOUR of the 10 qualified candidates in the Umno presidential election on May 11 are fighting their first vice presidential elections. They are Datuk Osu Sukam of Sabah, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman of Johor, Datuk Abu Hassan Omar of Selangor and Negeri Sembilan's durable political boss, Tan Sri Isa Samad.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Datuk Dr Rais Yatim and Tengku Razaleigh are considered "veterans" for having run more than once. For several of these men, the May 11 poll will be their last party electioneering while Osu and Ghani, in particular, are at the beginning.

The late-in-the-day-candidate Tengku Razaleigh's nomination by the divisional committee of Gua Musang and not by the delegates at the divisional meeting, while not unusual in Tunku Abdul Rahman's time, is abnormal in the new century even if not unconstitutional. I am told the Umno Supreme Council will determine if the nomination is appropriate, even legal. A European diplomat said to me during the weekend: "One should admire the Kelantan prince's last-ditch attempt to have a part in the Umno drama even if it takes his own parish to nominate him to qualify."

All candidates are working hard, claiming that they are approachable. Two, not immodestly, are posing as a potential prime minister. Three especially are burning late-night candles to get the message out to the 2,000-odd delegates that they are absolutely what they claim they see.

The major part of vice presidents' job as "heirs" to the deputy president of Umno is to think big thoughts about the future of the party as it is now facing inexorable opposition pressures, Pas in particular. Many ruling parties are under attack to great popular acclaim in South Korea, Thailand and other nations.

In last November's general elections, the electorate sent Umno a wake-up call. It is not known whether Umno delegates will be sending the "heirs" a message: listen or look out - we are fed-up with old politics and politicians who did not fulfill the promises they made in 1987 and during the last Umno presidential election.

Delegates are smart this time around. Although they may be new, young, even inexperienced, they should not be fooled by the fast-talking candidates in particular. They must choose the three best candidates who in their opinion are perceived as the ones who can win over an Internet generation of Bumiputeras who are seen to be rather wary if not hostile of Government and whose support is crucial if Umno and the nation were to move successfully into the 21st Century.

Is there a potent candidate who has the ability (and respect) to build a consensus for change in the party post-Dr Mahathir and Abdullah Badawi?

Umno must look ahead and take the lead, and fast, bringing the Internet and other information technologies to its members and Bumiputeras because the Internet can - have no fear of it - greatly enhance access to knowledge, education and what the Government does in addition to the traditional media and other channels.

The three who "come home" should be Umno's point-men to attract the young generation and take the fight into the enemy's territories.

Malay politics is complicated and is being actively stirred by all sorts of forces which are bent on tearing the Bumiputeras apart. Umno cannot afford to have weak leaders as a consequence.

The three should be men who can help Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi make Umno more exciting to young Bumiputeras or risk an even more serious setback in the 11th general elections in 2003 or 2004.

I shall not, in this article, point out who I think the three should be. I shall do that in the last week of the campaign. We shall watch who among the 10 candidates has the shrewdest electoral instincts and ability to muster young delegates, also reassuring the old delegates and take great pains to elect two good, agreeable peers and not potential "rivals" or "enemies". This is a crucial test for his political acumen and acuity.

The nation will watch this year's Umno election closely simply because they want to know who comes after Dr Mahathir and Abdullah. I believe the result will be roughly what the delegates can expect, cobbled together by acceptable (and practical) compromise.

Johor has three candidates, Selangor and Negri Sembilan two each. I am stung that not one of these candidates has offered to withdraw despite three to four are seen, even by their friends, as not prime ministerial timber.

Johor, in its golden years of Umno politics, once provided all the three vice presidents, an unlikely feat to be repeated. Then, the Johoreans were giants. They were elected without having to barnstorm the nation bearing gifts.

Then, national leaders were treated with awe. If only Malaysians were so kind to the present leaders. Dr Mahathir is an exception. He is both respected and disliked for his bluntness with a reputation that he enjoys thumbing his nose at the only superpower and for that the US media hates him and adores Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. It criticises Dr Mahathir for daring to lecture the US yet all what he does is to respond in kind to Madeleine Albright's bad habit to always lecture any nation which opposes US foreign policy and for portraying her nation's contention that Anwar is the "legitimate" ruler of Malaysia. Dr Mahathir offers no apologies - he will do it time and again to make Malaysians understand what is happening in international politics following the end of the Cold War or bipolarity. The question is often asked: Who can, besides him, articulate a strategy for dealing with the pressures of the geopolitical landscape of the post-Cold War World and at home to meet Pas leaders head-on and overcome the ultra-conservative Islamists as he has done in five general elections?

I sense that we scarcely have any (of Dr Mahathir's calibre and courage). But I am sure all the 10 vice presidential candidates feel they are capable of taking over from him, otherwise none would have the temerity to run.

I shall fight the temptation to be unduly influenced by my memories of past Umno presidential elections. Still, I can say for sure that this election is not anywhere half as exciting as those of 1974 or 1987.

As democratic institutions have strengthened and good governance is growing, Umno should also look for some bright and fresh faces as its vice presidents in 2003.

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