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## Misgivings over no-contest advice

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WHEN Umno politician Mohd Alwi Che Ahmad flew off to Mecca for his umrah a week ago, he thought he could put politics out of his mind for a while.

It did turn out that way for a number of days. But on Wednesday, he opened the Saudi English daily in his hotel and, there, staring back at him were two large photographs of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

It was a report that Dr Mahathir and Abdullah had been endorsed for Umno's two top posts by the supreme council. Any further effort to forget politics on Alwi's part was put aside for the rest of that day.

Umno people at home learnt of the decision much more swiftly and with less restraint.

A Terengganu Umno branch chairman received a call about midday on Monday from a businessman friend who had heard the news over the radio. His reaction was a loud "What?!"

But it was good enough for his friend, a former Umno member now with Parti Keadilan Nasional, to laughingly suggest: "You can join us."

On the other hand, a veteran Umno figure was said to have grown so emotional over the news that he cried and said words to the effect that "if this is the way things are going to be, then Pas can take Pahang in the next election and the country will be like East and West Germany".

Highly melodramatic but that was the impact of the move on some people.

There is no point beating about the bush. The no-contest move shook the Umno ground in an unprecedented way and many were hopping mad when it was initially thought that the move was a directive.

Tempers only cooled when party leaders began to clarify that the supreme council's decision was not a compulsory ruling but only advice - or, as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim puts it, "official advice".

A number of supreme council members were clearly taken aback by the unreservedness and scale of the reaction.

"I'll be facing them (Umno members in his division) this weekend and I'm not looking forward to it," says one Deputy Minister shortly before going off for the Raya break.

Other divisional leaders have decided that although they themselves support the decision, they will not push it down the throats of the grassroots.

Even Perlis Umno which had advocated a no-contest for the president's post at a meeting on new year's eve is likely to allow the grassroots some leeway on the issue.

Says Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim: "I'm not stopping them if they want to go ahead and nominate ... even in my own division."

Besides, says Datuk Dr Affifuddin Omar, supreme council member and Padang Terap division head: "Umno branches nowadays are made up of small businessmen, teachers, government servants.

"You can't force them to accept things but I'll try to influence them."

And if there is a need to summarise the furore over the supreme council's move, it would be that the Umno grassroots simply did not like the way the supreme council members presumed their feelings and views regarding the party elections in May.

A common refrain heard the past few days was: Do they think we are too stupid to think for ourselves?

Umno members, it was pointed out, had already given the current leadership an extended lease of a year when polls were postponed from last to this year.

Moreover, this would be the second time the two top posts would not be contested. (The 1995 general assembly passed a resolution to leave the two posts uncontested for the 1996 elections.)

Most believe that Dr Mahathir would not have been challenged even if there were no "official advice".

However, the No. 2 post, they say, ought to have been left to the grassroots to decide because Abdullah was asked by the supreme council to assume the duties of the deputy president.

"As deputy president Pak Lah (Abdullah) is likely to move on to become president ... I think people in the party want to see him reach the top with real grassroots endorsement," says the above politician from Terengganu.

Nevertheless, Abdullah is not the real issue here, "but the way things are done".

"It gives the impression there is fear at the top," says the Terengganu politician.

Perhaps the most unfortunate part of this episode is the perception that the very top leadership was behind the move.

Actually, by the time the supreme council sat last Monday, most Umno leaders were already decided that they did not wish to see a fight for the top seat but were less certain about what ought to be done about the No. 2 post.

The idea was said to have come quite spontaneously from Malacca Menteri Besar Datuk Mohd Ali Rustam during the meeting and was put to the floor for discussion.

Almost everyone around the table spoke in favour of the proposal while the handful who were silent - they included Terengganu's Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad and Kelantan's Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah - did not object and that was how the consensus was carried.

But Umno members who watched the news on TV that evening could not fail but make the following observations: how Tan Sri Khalil Yaacob had seemed rather nervous when announcing the decision, the serene smile that played on Abdullah's lips, the solemnity of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and how serious Razaleigh looked as he flipped through his notes.

It is not difficult to understand why the supreme council acted the way it did.

There was definitely some degree of wanting to please the leader - it happens in political parties everywhere - but the larger reason is that most of them were loath to have to take sides in the event of a contest.

Still, the gusto with which some of them supported the move seems to suggest what Johor Baru divisional head Datuk Shahrir Samad describes as a "disconnection from reality".

According to Rais: "I can understand the mindset behind it. Umno has lost a bit of ground, to say the least, after a tumultuous election and a fullscale, top two contest is the last thing the leaders would want."

Alwi's reason for supporting the no-contest stand is a little different: "It will allow Dr Mahathir to step down gracefully ... in his own time, of course ... and for Pak Lah to take over.

"Then, we have four years to correct Umno's image and get ready for the next general election."

Another concern among Umno people is that leaders further down the hierarchy will also start using no-contest moves to stay in power.

At the last Wanita executive council meeting, for instance, there was a move to deter a contest for the two top Wanita posts but it was quickly

shot down by other exco members.

The meeting also backed a no-contest move for the president's post but balked at doing the same for the post of deputy president.

"It's not that we don't like Pak Lah. If the majority says we want Pak Lah, then let that be, but the supreme council cannot control us like that," says a Wanita figure.

The point is, Umno's history has rarely seen fights for the top Umno post.

Changes in the top leadership is by succession rather than contests.

The first big - and devastating - fight was in 1987 and many in Umno are still trying to live down their role in it.

"Rocking the boat is not the thing especially when the water is choppy," says Deputy Defence Minister Datuk Shafie Apdal who had spoken up strongly for the no-contest move at the supreme council meeting.

Still, more than a decade has passed since the 1987 split and some think the party is ready to see freer competition.

"Competition is not always bad. Umno needs to renew itself after the last general election," says a branch leader from the Federal Territory.

It is too early to tell whether all this heat and fury will precipitate into action among the grassroots.

But even now, few can see anyone with sufficient clout to take on Dr Mahathir.

Incumbent vice-president Najib has since denied ever harbouring the intention of going for the No. 2 post.

For weeks though, speculation was rife in Umno that Najib would back Razaleigh for the second top post.

Razaleigh, on his part, has not exactly gone all out to quell such speculation.

He has also been preoccupied after his elder sister Tengku Azizah passed away last month.

A Kelantan politician close to him says the prince has "kept his thoughts very much to himself" since Umno's dismal show in Kelantan at the polls.

Razaleigh, says the politician, has no intention at all of challenging Dr Mahathir although he seems less firm about Razaleigh's sights on other posts.

There has been a steady stream of "visitors" to Razaleigh's Jalan Laggak Golf office, many of them declaring their support for him.

He listens but is generally non-committal and he usually concludes by saying he has "no plans".

Until Razaleigh declares his intention, the speculation will continue.

This Umno general assembly will be interesting not just for the fact that party delegates will be picking a new batch of leaders but for what promises to be a lively debate.

It is, after all, the first formal gathering of the Umno rank and file after the national polls.

Signals are already being sent that delegates want a "free assembly".

It will be an opportunity for explanation, letting-off of steam, feedback and, if the leadership handles it well, reconsolidation.

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