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Moment of truth

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HAVE YOU noticed how Malay men normally perk up when they clock out at the end of a gruelling day at the office every Thursday? For most, the reason for this fervour is purely hormonal. Its roots are more religious. First, an explanation of the significance of Thursday. The Muslim method of tracking time differs from Roman chronometry in that gathering dusk signifies the approach of a new day. Malays, therefore, call creeping dusk on Thursday malam Jumaat (Friday evening). Its significance is entirely religious. Traditionally, Malay Muslims perform the tahlil (special prayers for the soul of the deceased) between the maghrib and isya prayers during malam Jumaat in their neighbourhood mosques. This is often followed by a modest kenduri, after which the congregational isya prayer is performed. After isya, the mosque rather quickly empties as the men make a beeline for home. There is another ritual of malam Jumaat which these men (and presumably their spouses) look forward to - the performance of their conjugal duties. The deed during malam Jumaat is worth more in the eyes of Islam as it is enjoined by the Prophet.

So, when party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad called on contenders for the various posts in the May party elections to stop campaigning, you could hear a collective groan of incredulity from among some of the less 'spouse-sensitive' menfolk. The women quietly thanked Dr Mahathir for pulling the rug from under the carpet of their husbands, many of whom would otherwise be gallivanting up and down the country ostensibly seeking favours of the political kind.

Now that the nominations phase is over, the attention is focussed on the main event - the actual triennial elections itself. Three have no worries. Party president Dr Mahathir, his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein can ignore the frenzied politicking and spend extra time polishing the content and delivery style of their speeches before the assembly.

In the race for the vice presidency, the two incumbents - Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and former Selangor party chief Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib - will face seven others. They are: Johor Umno chief Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Selangor chief Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, Negri Sembilan Umno chairman Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad and Sabah Umno head Datuk Seri Osu Sukam. Also in the fray are supreme council member Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Pagoh Umno division chairman Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Jelebu division advisor Datuk Rais Yatim. It will be interesting to see how Johor delegates vote with three equally strong candidates from their home state to divvy up support between them.

Based on nominations, Najib is sitting comfortably with support from 150 divisions followed by Abdul Ghani (80) and Abu Hassan (58). Observers are not dismissing the challenge of Muhammad Taib who has garnered 32 nominations, placing him sixth on the list.

Nominations need not translate into actual votes at the General Assembly and the candidates know it. Many candidates' homes are besieged by 'well-wishers' who know their support is coveted. For the candidates, the best way to meet as many supporters as possible is to host tahlil sessions on malam Jumaat which doesn't open them to censure for any breach of campaign etiquette.

A lot can happen between now and the General Assembly. There's nothing to prevent delegates from taking the money but not delivering the vote,

which is done by secret ballot. Repeated reminders from Dr Mahathir and Abdullah for delegates to reject such practice may also sway votes one way or the other.

You can safely say that it was not wholly the promotion of matrimonial harmony that prompted Dr Mahathir to remind candidates and their agents to stop campaigning. It's the insidious return of 'money politics' that is giving cause for concern. Already, three cases are being scrutinised by the management and disciplinary committee headed by deputy president Abdullah.

No amount of presidential cajoling, however, can prevent a determined candidate from campaigning. Having crossed one hurdle, they can't be expected to just sit at home and leave their political future in the lap of the Gods. Surely, having invested a lot in the preliminary rounds, how is one expected to see the battle through?

It is interesting to watch how candidates are circumventing this 'stay-at-home' advice. The vice presidential or supreme council hopefuls may be tucked up in bed in a state up north but hundreds of miles down south in sleepy Gombak, something is astir. Just station yourself in any one of those cosy Thai-food restaurants along the dimly-lit Jalan Gombak leading up to the Karak Highway frequented by the average makcik and pakcik crowd. If you had popped in to any one of them lately, you would have noticed flashy cars sporting out-of-town single-digit number plates being admired by the batik-clad car park valets. In some discreet corner of the restaurant, the car's even flashier owner can be seen regally holding court. Picking at the untidy remnants of a sweet and sour kerapu, he banters jovially with his dinner companions. The conversation is decidedly political in nature. The man picking up the RM250 dinner tab is drawn from a team of 'runners' - assistants acting as agents for aspiring candidates who fan far and wide to press the flesh of as many delegates as possible. It is at non-descript locations like these that promises are made and commitments are extracted.

Compare this with the elections of 1993, described as the pinnacle of this culture of 'money politics'. Then, delegates were fed, feted and flown to far-flung locations during campaigning. Come the party assembly, the delegates needed only to show up with a suitcase and the bill for their four-day, five-night stay in some salubrious hotel not too far from the PWTC will have been paid for, with some spending money thrown in.

Supreme Council member Tan Sri Hussein Ahmad is so incensed with this practice that he has candidly declared that it is an 'open secret' that money politics has reared its ugly head again. 'There's no point in anybody denying it. The problem is it is quite impossible to bring proof because they accept it willingly,' he says.

The Prime Minister's concern has been reflected in his reply to questions from reporters, after one Supreme Council meeting (Monday, April 17), who asked why he had pre-empted this portion of his speech. 'There are certain things which if we wait until the assembly, it will be too late. So, before that happens, we need to make some indication.' At the Umno Supreme Council meeting, he disclosed he would in his speech advise all delegates to reject any candidate who used money to buy votes.

Money politics notwithstanding, one major talking point for this General Assembly has to be Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's disappearance from the vice presidency contenders list. Umno members have been agog over his initial strong challenge which soon petered out to a damp squib, now looking like a non-starter. This is due to his failure to secure the single nomination that would have made him a candidate for the vice-presidency. Many consider the Kelantan prince an undecipherable enigma. On one hand, he professes to aspire to nothing more than simply to serve the party - in

whatever capacity. On the other, he gripes about the unfairness with which the Supreme Council party rejected his final nomination tally. He pointed out how the Supreme Council comprised players with an interest in the outcome but with the power to referee the proceedings too.

This setback will clearly rile Razaleigh's supporters who see a senior seat in the party now as paving the way for something more substantial in three years' time. That is when Dr Mahathir is expected to make way for his successor and the party would be looking to a candidate of Prime Ministerial calibre. While his most ardent supporters rue this 'technical knockout', they can take solace in that bruised and battered he may be, Razaleigh is interested only in serving the party, never mind the position. Anyone thinking this particular match is over do so at their own peril. Ominous noises have already been made and we wait with bated breath at the outcome of the next Gua Musang divisional meeting, of which he heads, for the continuation of this political saga.

Contrast Razaleigh's travails with the smooth path towards nomination of Sabah's sole representative Osu. He has received 34 nominations, with all 20 divisions from Sabah backing him in the contest for the vice presidency. Many observers believe he might just secure one of the three positions as delegates (those whose votes are not dependent on any form of monetary considerations) might like to see some mould-breaking moments at this General Assembly.

By the time the Deputy President makes his opening address on May 11, the tussle for leadership of the Wanita wing would have been settled. Incumbent Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman who has secured 73 nominations faces a tough challenge from Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz with 92 nominations. Rafidah would have more need to rely on others doing the 'talking' on her behalf as her punishing ministerial duties have taken a toll on her voice box. Just as the race enters its home stretch, she has lost her voice which only complete rest can cure. More's the pity as we will miss her pithy retorts and caustic comments which would liven up what would otherwise be a staid General Assembly. During the jockeying for position before the nominations even started, several Wanita members suggested Rafidah should set her sights at the vice presidency for which she was described as eminently qualified. This raised her heckles enough for her to retort that she was very flattered to receive the praises heaped on her '... compared to three years ago when I was considered not fit to lead Wanita'.

An unfortunate Wanita casualty is the incumbent deputy Wanita chief Datuk Napsiah Omar who will not be able to defend her post. After all the 165 divisions completed their meetings, she had collected 24 nominations - just one short of the minimum to qualify for contest. The post will see a straight fight between Supreme Council members Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, who obtained 93 nominations, and Perak Wanita head Aion Khairiyah Mohd Abbas, with 48. Napsiah must be a great sport or gallant loser as the Kuala Pilah MP and Wanita division head shrugged her misfortune with 'I will now have more time for the division'.

Absent too will be delegates from the Bandar Tun Razak division which has been suspended by the Supreme Council. They will not be able to participate in the Youth and Wanita assemblies on May 10 and the party General Assembly on May 11. The move came about following complaints lodged against its leadership by more than half of its 51 branches. Division head Tamunif Mokhtar has cried foul, saying none of his division's committee members have been asked to explain the charges made before the party's management and disciplinary committee.

There's still a flicker of hope, though, as the division may appeal, claiming it was unfair for the Supreme Council to make such a decision

based only on allegations. Otherwise, they and those who missed the boat can seek solace that they'd be able to concentrate fully on far more pleasurable private pursuits this malam Jumaat.

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