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Muhd a surprise winner, joins Najib, Muhyiddin as VPs

FORMER Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib was voted in as Umno vice-president at the party's 54th General Assembly yesterday. He garnered 853 votes, the second highest, joining Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin who received 1,289 and 813 votes respectively.

Muhammad stepped down as the Selangor Menteri Besar in 1997 after he was charged in an Australian court for failing to declare currency then worth RM2.4 million at the Brisbane airport and for making a false declaration when entering Australia. He was subsequently acquitted of the charges.

Najib and Muhammad are incumbents in the contest for vice-presidents while Muhyiddin returns after his big defeat at the 1996 election.

Both Najib, who is Defence Minister, and Muhammad will be serving their third consecutive terms as vice-president. They won in their first attempts in 1993 as members of what was then known as Team Wawasan.

Muhyiddin, too, was a member of this then victorious team but he finished a poor sixth the last time around. He was not in the previous Supreme Council cast.

Six other candidates - a chief minister, two menteris besar and three Cabinet ministers, had vied for the posts.

At this year's election, Najib had received the highest number of nominations at 150 while Muhammad and Muhyiddin obtained 32 and 30 nominations respectively.

Some observers noted that the vice-presidency line-up is similar to that nominated by the Kubang Pasu and Kepala Batas divisions. "You can interpret it as you like," one said, when asked if there had been something of a "subtle" message from the leadership of the "favoured" line-up.

Delegates had cast their ballots after party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad opened the party's 54th General Assembly.

Party permanent chairman Tan Sri Sulaiman Ninam Shah announced the results at 9.10pm. He had earlier adjourned the assembly at 6.30pm.

Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi won uncontested the post of president and deputy president respectively. Abdullah was the party's vice-president but undertook the tasks of the deputy president when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was sacked from the party in 1998. He did not seek re-election as vice-president but instead received 161 nominations to contest the deputy president post.

Dr Mahathir, speaking after the announcement was made, said the outcome of the elections is expected. "Many expected this line-up. Delegates have made their choice. They (the vice-presidents) must work hard," he said.

Abdullah congratulated the new vice-presidents and Supreme Council members, saying that it is a "balanced" line-up with the infusion of old and new faces.

He believes the new Supreme Council members would be able to contribute new ideas to the party.

Najib, in comments moments after the results were announced, said that the new line-up does not reflect the "Wawasan" team. "There has never been a team.

"We don't go as a team. This is a choice of delegates and not something that was planned or a pre-election arrangement," he said.

The contest for the 25-member powerful Supreme Council yielded some

interesting trends. For one, none of the Wanita Umno representatives won. Secondly, unlike previous practices of sending the menteri besar and Cabinet ministers "wholesale" to the Supreme Council, almost half the winners are outside the Government.

Non-Members of Parliament, too, made it like Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, Datuk Annuar Musa, Datuk Yusof Nor and Datuk Shahrir Samad.

While Mustapa and Annuar represent Kelantan and Yusof represents Terengganu (both are Pas-ruled states), Shahrir is the sole winner from Johor after an absence of 10 years from the Supreme Council.

Observers pointed out the biggest change in this election is the smallest representation of Menteri Besar in the line-up.

None of the three menteri besar and a chief minister who went for the vice-presidency made it. Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim failed to secure a Supreme Council seat while Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Barakbah stayed out.

Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Wira Mohamad Ali Rustam topped the Supreme Council list with 1,647 votes. Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob and Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali are the only Umno heads of state governments in the Supreme Council.

Political analysts said the biggest question now is whether the losing menteri besar and Cabinet ministers would be made appointed members. In any case, menteri besar and Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Osu Sukam would still be attending Supreme Council meetings in their capacity as state Umno liaison chiefs.

"Does this mean that the old debate of whether Umno is more powerful than the Cabinet will resurface?" a political analyst asked.

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