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`No-contest' does not mean there is no democracy

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THE behind-the-scenes campaigning that started even before the date for the Umno elections was fixed is set to pick up speed and intensify following the Supreme Council's announcement on Monday that the general assembly will be held from May 10 to 13, with elections on May 11, the 54th anniversary of the party's birth.

This will be the first party polls after the 10th general elections on November 29 last year. There will most likely be another round of Umno elections in 2003 before the country goes to the polls again.

The Umno Supreme Council decided on Monday that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad be renominated as president and vice-president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi be nominated to fill the vacant deputy president's post.

"All state liaison heads have agreed on this and have been asked to convey this stand to the branches and divisions which will hold their meetings soon to nominate candidates for the various party posts," Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaacob said.

The divisions and branches have six weeks from January 16 to conclude their annual meetings.

Though not a directive, Khalil explained that the council members unanimously agreed that the no-contest decision would avert intense campaigning that might lead to disunity.

This is the third time that a no-contest stand has been taken regarding the top posts in Umno. In 1993 a similar decision was made but Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim cited strong grassroots support for his challenge to then Umno deputy president Tun Ghafar Baba. Ghafar later withdrew before the party elections.

In 1995, Umno again decided that the top two posts should not be contested in the party elections for the 1996-1999 term. Dr Mahathir was last challenged for the Umno presidency in 1987 by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

According to some newspaper reports, the reaction this time around to the no-contest stand for the top two posts in Umno has been mixed.

Those who support it point out that Umno has just suffered a setback of sorts in the recent general elections, losing some of its support among the Malays to Pas.

They say a contest for the presidency and deputy presidency will plant seeds of disunity and infighting, splitting the party at a time when its goal should be to close ranks and strengthen its popular support.

Rather than using resources to contest for posts, they add, efforts should be focused on regaining the confidence and support of party members and the people.

Umno members opposed to the no-contest proposal, meanwhile, say the posts should be contested in the spirit of democracy. Others stress that such a proposal need not have been made in the first place.

"Leave it open and see who dares to challenge them. Dr Mahathir and Abdullah have proven to be a good team. Even if they leave the posts open to contest, I don't think anyone will challenge them," said one party member.

The argument that it is undemocratic to restrict contests for any post in the party elections has been raised before. But just because Umno is democratic does not mean there must be a contest. Just like it doesn't have to rain simply because the sky is cloudy.

Democracy, or more specifically the competition for posts, is still alive and well for the other Supreme Council seats. The attention will be on the three vice presidents' posts, for which some have already indicated they will be ready to contest.

Amid all this excitement, candidates must remember to campaign and compete in a healthy and ethical manner, and above all avoid using money to woo support.

Come May 11, there may be more surprises. "No-contest" is the official stand - and not a directive - of the Umno Supreme Council, the party's highest and most influential governing body.

Will some Umno members decide to go against it?

If they do, it will say a lot about the state of the party, and about the kind of up-and-coming leaders within the party.

The country is on the road to economic recovery, though not yet back to its pre-crisis levels. The Government has its hands full steering the country out of the downturn, and strengthening the economy and people to face the challenges that the new millennium will bring.

In this context then, if Umno members and delegates to the general assembly in May defy the Supreme Council's position and do allow a challenge for top two posts, why will they do it?

Will it be to unite and strengthen the party and Malays, out of loyalty to Umno and the country, because of their blinding fanaticism and support for certain individuals, or for their own personal gain?

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