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No `exchange' a welcome change

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"MY handphone has been on 24 hours since last month," a minister in the Umno vice-president race had said just two days before key candidates to the Umno election were summoned to the Prime Minister's house in Putrajaya on Monday.

However, his handphone has since been permanently switched off, presumably as an immediate result of the complete stop on campaigning for all Umno election candidates.

This is the most comprehensive move yet to control campaigning in any Umno election or, to put it another way, one of the most definitive statements against money politics in Umno.

Cut down to basics, the ban, or "pledge" as it is put, means no contact of any form between candidates and delegates from now until May 11.

Another VP candidate left the PM's house on Monday night walking on air.

He had refused to play the money game, telling his dismayed supporters that he was not going to pay for votes and that he was prepared even to lose. Neither was he going to lose sleep over it because "the VP thing is not a life and death matter".

His supporters had grown increasingly worried as the campaign unrolled; their man had managed a good number of nominations but feedback from the ground last week seemed to indicate he was falling back because of his unequivocal stand against money for votes.

The candidate's supporters have since greeted news of the ban with cries of "Alhamdulillah!"

Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, who had spoken out openly about the use of money shortly after the campaign for nominations began, was elated.

"I am truly the happiest person. This really levels the playing field. I wish it had been done from day one."

Another election hopeful went home after the meeting and had a good night's sleep for the first time in weeks. The next day, he went to the office and did some real work for a change.

"I'm 100 per cent for it. You won't believe what it's been like out there ... we are pulled left, right and centre by these delegates," he said.

The Monday meeting at the PM's house began at 8pm with dinner. Those present included the host, the nine VP nominees and the contenders for the deputy Youth leader post as well as the those for the number one and two Wanita posts.

Dinner ended about 9pm and the meeting proper commenced about 9.15pm, with Dr Mahathir Mohamad speaking for about 45 minutes on what could happen if money politics went on unchecked.

Evidently, the party president had been getting pretty sound feedback on who had been up to what. For instance, one VP contender was asked about a major conference on the Malay world that he was organising in Mecca.

(For weeks, Umno circles had been talking about it. The conference was scheduled for late May, after the Umno elections, but flight tickets to the gathering had already been issued to "participants".)

When Dr Mahathir finished, Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad was the first to speak, agreeing that too much time had been spent on campaigning and that everyone should immediately stop and recall their operatives who were out on the ground even at that very moment.

Most of those present then took turns to speak, all of them endorsing

the suggestion. Two senior ministers, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, drafted the declaration which was then signed by those present. The meeting dispersed just after 11pm.

Actually, most of the VP aspirants are quite relieved by the ban because a common complaint from many top candidates has been how "demanding" delegates to the coming general assembly have become.

Even those who would have preferred "not to give", have been forced to join the fray because, as they say, "bagi salah, tak bagi kalah" (it's wrong to give but you lose if you don't).

Only a handful have really had the courage or willpower to hold off.

One of them is Syed Hamid who said: "The candidate must resist and the delegate must stop demanding. But I know that just because I refuse to pay, people go around, saying I'm kedekut (parsimonious)."

Controversial Seremban MP Ishak Ismail, who is also a supreme council candidate, has no qualms about telling off those who ask him for "payment".

Once he asked a demanding delegate to "go to hell" but mostly he tries to keep his cool and tells them that he would rather spend his money to sponsor poor students in their studies.

And on Friday evening when Dr Mahathir met candidates for the supreme council race, Ishak suggested that Umno headquarters help prepare and distribute bio-data background of candidates to all the delegates.

The Friday meeting also began with dinner followed by the president speaking up against the use of money politics in campaigning. But several supreme council candidates asked that campaigning be allowed. One of them, Dr Norraesah Mohamad, said that although she had worked hard for the party, she got little publicity and people did not know what she had done.

Another, Datuk Shahrir Samad, suggested that headquarters come out with a chart of the candidates, carrying their photographs, names and ballot numbers.

Although the meeting ended without a similar signed pledge to stop campaigning, all present agreed with the PM's advice against the use of money politics.

And quite typically, Ishak approached the PM at the end of the meeting, shook hands and asked the elder man rather cheekily, "Can you vote for me, Datuk Seri? Is this considered as campaigning?" and both men laughed loudly.

But generally, there is a prevailing view in the party that only those who have served their time should go for posts, especially top posts.

By then, said Kelantan Umno Youth figure Alwi Che Ahmad, what "you have done or not done would already be known and there's no need to campaign."

This sort of argument also basically discounts young, ambitious leaders from contesting unless they are unusually outstanding.

"We want things to be like the days when people were elected because they deserved it, not because they had lots of money," said supreme council candidate Datuk Azmi Khalid.

Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Nazri Aziz is one of those who have done extremely well without bothering to campaign. Several weeks ago, he went to Perlis for a ministry function without informing any of the Umno divisions.

When a Perlis Umno figure asked why he had come and gone without meeting any delegates, Nazri replied: "That's why I didn't tell anyone."

Others say that even though some leaders are well known, they still want to hear these leaders articulate their views and aspirations - especially those in this year's VP race which is regarded as forming the succession line.

A Kuala Lumpur-based corporate figure and delegate for his division had

actually made the effort to attend discussions with six out of the nine VP candidates. And the seriousness with which he took his duties as a delegate was evident in his careful assessment of the candidates he had met with.

His argument for some form of campaign: "You have to check them out yourself because some of these guys have good spin doctors. And if you are down to a choice of two, you need to get a feel of who is more worthy."

According to an aide to a minister, this year's campaign had started off decently enough. But then, talk that some divisions were being paid RM30,000 to RM50,000 to nominate certain candidates began to surface. By the time nominations closed, stories of rapacious delegates had begun to make the rounds.

The most voracious are said to be the "G7", as the elected delegates - seven from every division - are known. Some of them had purportedly spent huge sums to get elected and were now out to recoup their "investments".

A divisional leader campaigning for the VP aspirant who had refused to play the money game was stumped when an elderly Pak Haji, complete with white kopiah and janggut, approached him and unabashedly asked for money.

"That's what kills me ... and after we had prayed and eaten together," the divisional leader told a friend.

And for the past two weekends, the scene at the house of one Menteri Besar candidate has resembled Hari Raya open houses, with delegates from all over the country streaming in and out.

The same candidate is said to have played golf with almost every supreme council candidate.

"This is the place where votes are traded and deals are cut," said an aide to a Minister.

Kelantan Umno circles have also been talking about a branch committee member who had reportedly spent RM70,000 just to get elected as a delegate.

"They say he is very `frust' now," said a well-known Kelantan Umno politician.

According to this politician, it has been "pesta time" for many delegates in Kelantan. Prior to the ban, batches of them would leave for KL every few days to call on Ministers especially in their ministries and homes.

These groups sometimes make more than one call on the same candidate and, presumably, more than one collection.

And during weekends, when two or three candidates would be in town, these delegates roam from one hotel to another "like small boys going from house to house for duit raya." It seems that these groups even include people who are not delegates but have jumped in for a fast buck.

"It's scary and shameful. That's why I support the ban (on campaigning). If it goes on till May 11, Umno will break into many parts," said the politician.

A supreme council candidate was in Terengganu several weekends ago; a group of delegates came to his hotel room but left after five minutes when told there would be no money paid out.

And when a Sabah politician called him to ask whether he was prepared to foot the hotel bill for some Sabah delegates coming into town, he told the politician: "I joined Umno when I was 17. When did Sabah join Umno? And you talk to me like this?"

In yet another case, a one-time minister planning to contest for one of the "G7" posts in his division backed off when told he would have to spend money.

According to Alwi, an Umno member in his division had badly wanted to be a delegate because he thought it would provide him the clout to get his

daughter who is teaching in Sabah a transfer back to Kelantan.

If so many people seem aware of what is going on, then why have not more reports been lodged to the Umno Disciplinary and Management Committee?

One reason is the reluctance among Umno colleagues to throw sand into the other's ricebowl. The other, and a more potent reason is that candidates, including the clean ones, know how easy it is to set each other up.

"Today you complain about A, tomorrow, A's man claims your man offered him RM2,000. What are you going to do?" said a Pemuda politician.

Senator Faridah Abu Hassan thinks the campaign ban is a much-needed cooling-off period until May 11.

"It was getting quite bad with people using even religious issues," she said.

A supreme council candidate's opinion of the ban: "If people think we are being treated like children, so be it. The fact is some of us have been behaving like children."