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Nominations show endorsement for status quo in Umno leadership

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WEEKENDS seem to be generating excitement. Not because some weekends are extended ones, but rather because they happen to be the days when the Umno divisional meetings are held.

This weekend will be no different with 29 more divisions getting down to the serious business of nominating their leaders to fill the supreme council, the party's highest decision-making body.

To date, 48 divisions have met and the results thus far tell an interesting development.

Party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has so far notched up 47 nominations. Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Umno vice president who is carrying out the duties of that the deputy president, has also received 47 nominations.

Kelantan Umno liaison chief, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, has received one nomination each for president and deputy president.

In order to contest for the presidency, a candidate needs at least 50 nominations (30 per cent) while to qualify for the deputy presidency, a candidate needs at least 33 nominations (20 per cent).

Abdullah, or Pak Lah, has already qualified to contest while Dr Mahathir is expected to sail through this weekend.

Some Umno leaders and rank and file have come up with an interesting conclusion to the latest tally.

They say Dr Mahathir and Abdullah are set to lead the party for the next three years, that is, the duration of the next term.

They say Pak Lah especially has done well while assuming the deputy president's duties and therefore, should logically be given the opportunity to take on the task fully.

The tally also suggests that Umno divisions, by and large, had taken heed of the council's advice that the top two posts not be contested. Tanah Merah is the only division so far to have not followed that advice.

Hence, the nomination for Tengku Razaleigh. As one observer commented: "You see, there is democracy in Umno".

That may be an understatement.

Even though the council had issued the advice, a few divisions in fact did proposed others to be nominated for the top posts.

For instance, Tengku Razaleigh's name was proposed at the Benut division in Johor but failed to gain endorsement.

His name also came up in Tasek Gelugor, Kuala Krai and Padang Terap but did not gain support. Tan Sri Musa Hitam too was proposed in Segamat but did not go beyond the division.

Branch representatives attending the divisional meetings debated on these names before giving their decision.

A senior leader in Umno raised a couple points on the nominations. He said they reflected the acceptance of Dr Mahathir's leadership, both at the party and the government level.

Umno, now more than ever needs a leader who can provide a point of reference for its members. As for the country, Dr Mahathir has proven his abilities, especially in helping take the country out of its worst economic downturn and put it on the fast track to recovery.

Abdullah, meanwhile, has done just as well. Under the tutelage of the Prime Minister, Abdullah helped deliver the Sabah Legislative Assembly to

the Barisan Nasional despite initial apprehension among some people. Pak Lah has proven that he can also undertake a big assignment, such as the Sabah election. He also criss-crosses the country often and at all hours to campaign for the party.

For the record, the BN took 31 out of the possible 48 seats in the Sabah election which was held on March 12 last year.

Of the 31 seats, Umno secured 24, LDP 2, SAPP 3 and PDS 2. Opposition PBS took 17 seats. Other parties which contested were Pas, Bersekutu, Setia, Pasok and a few Independent candidates.

As for the Nov 29 general election, the BN under Dr Mahathir was returned with a two-third majority, reflecting once again the people's acceptance of its policies and administration.

The BN won 148 seats in the 193-seat Dewan Rakyat despite the Opposition's onslaught.

"Some people said Dr Mahathir's administration must pass certain tests. They also mentioned that Pak Lah must also pass certain tests.

"First, it was the Sabah election. The BN passed the test very well. Next came the general election, and the BN passed that too.

"So, what's wrong with maintaining the status quo, having passed the tests put up by critics? If they have shown much success, why not just give them the mandate to continue? It's only logical... in football, no coach would want to change a winning team," the senior leader, who is also a key member of the supreme council said.

Divisions which have yet to hold their meetings will now be analysing the nominations thus far.

A couple of combinations are being studied. Having seen an increasingly clear picture of the number one and two posts, the divisions will now shift their focus slightly to that of the vice-presidential hopefuls. Umno veterans offer interesting views on the way voting may end for this position come May 11. Delegates may opt for a combination of one Cabinet minister and two Menteri Besar or one Menteri Besar and two Cabinet ministers.

Why?

A Federal minister is important in providing continuity at the national level while Menteri Besar provide State-level support and strong grass roots co-ordination.

It remains to be seen which of the combinations will emerge. For that matter, it remains to be seen whether these combinations are relevant in today's political climate.

For the record, incumbent vice president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who is also Defence Minister, and Johor Umno Liaison chief Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman who is also Menteri Besar, are leading the pack.

Both have qualified to contest while Selangor liaison chief Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar needs one more nomination to qualify.

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