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Question of relevancy for Razaleigh in Umno set-up

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TENGGU Razaleigh Hamzah's oval office in his Langgak Golf house in Kuala Lumpur has all the trappings of a top-level politician.

He operates like one, too, and maintains a small outfit of loyal staff, some having started with him during his days as a key figure in Malaysian politics and remained to be so even when the chips were down.

Now, much as he is merely a supreme council member by invitation (by virtue of being the Kelantan Umno liaison chief), Tengku Razaleigh still seems to be able to draw attention from both the local and foreign media.

On Wednesday, a local English daily quoting sources said that Tengku Razaleigh was scheduled to hold a Press conference in the afternoon to announce his decision to go for the Umno deputy president's post.

The Press corps started calling his office, much to the chagrin of his receptionist.

"It rang non-stop since I came in and when I told them that there is no Press conference scheduled and that the newspaper report was wrong, many did not believe me.

"Now, look outside. The Press is still there. Earlier, the number was greater until Ahmad Shabery (Chik) went out to tell them that there is no Press conference," she said.

While she may feel disturbed, Tengku Razaleigh did not seem to be the least bothered.

When Ahmad Shabery, his trusted aide, stepped into the oval office where lunch was being prepared to tell him that some members of the Press were still waiting outside, Tengku Razaleigh replied:

"Mat, enjoy it while it lasts. After the Umno election, they may not even want to talk to you."

The remark could have been a mere point of conversation but given the circumstances, it was a loaded one.

In essence, Tengku Razaleigh knows that all the media attention he is getting now is due to the widespread speculation that he would be going for the deputy Umno president's post.

He knows very well that this may be his last chance to get back into the mainstream Umno leadership and if he did not make the cut, he would not be "news" anymore.

In fact, against all odds, Tengku Razaleigh had managed to remain in the media limelight despite leaving Umno in 1988 after losing to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the race for the party presidency one year earlier. This is actually the legacy Tengku Razaleigh carries with him in the run-up to this year's Umno election.

In retrospect, if Tengku Razaleigh does decide to go for the deputy president's post, it will actually be a "reunion" of sorts for him and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

After all, Abdullah was part of Tengku Razaleigh's "Team B" which went against Dr Mahathir.

However, as it turned out, both Tengku Razaleigh and his partner Tan Sri Musa Hitam, who went for the deputy presidency, lost to Dr Mahathir and Tun Ghafar Baba.

But Abdullah, who contested for one of the three vice-president's posts, won, making him the only "Team B" candidate for top party posts to make the cut.

And when Tengku Razaleigh went on to form Semangat 46, Abdullah remained

in Umno.

While that is in the past, some parts of that history seemed to be re-enacting, hence the reason why some political pundits are speculating that Tengku Razaleigh may even go for the number one party post against Dr Mahathir.

Tengku Razaleigh seems aware of all this and the fact that Abdullah used to be a member of his "Team B" is not something which had been forgotten. His reply to this was evasive, throwing in a short remark which can be interpreted in whichever way one chooses to.

"Team B was not just me. Musa also had his people."

Of course, one would say that all these were in the past but it was actually the past that made everything about the Umno leadership so intertwined.

Look at the intertwining past Tengku Razaleigh and Dr Mahathir shared. Prior to Dr Mahathir's ascension to the Deputy Prime Ministership in 1977, both he and Tengku Razaleigh were two of the three Umno vice-presidents and Ghafar was the third.

Then Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn decided to choose Dr Mahathir over the more senior vice-presidents Ghafar and Tengku Razaleigh, in that order, which many believed led to Ghafar feeling upset.

Recollecting the past fondly, Tengku Razaleigh said the country was in a mess in the early 1970s after the 1969 racial riots.

"Tun Razak Hussein (then the Prime Minister) was working with me, Dr Mahathir, Ghafar and other senior Umno leaders on ways to overcome our problems.

"We came up with the National Economic Policy which managed to endear ourselves back to the Malays and restore Umno's position as the leading Malay party.

"That is what we need now. A blueprint on how to win back the Malay support for Umno," he added.

"Then there were Petronas and Felda. We also moved into oil palm planting and not merely stick to rubber.

"Look how palm oil has helped our economy and the villagers, who are into that agricultural sector, during the recent downturn."

By then, lunch in the oval office was over and Tengku Razaleigh had to attend to some other matters.

Based on the conversation, Tengku Razaleigh seemed to be still relevant and could play a big role in the whole Umno set-up. But the question is whether the Umno members feel that he is relevant. Or maybe, he had truly missed the boat in the 1987 Umno election.

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