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Race for posts in Umno hots up

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FOR several weeks now, the curving road in front of the Kuala Lumpur home of an Umno vice-presidential candidate has been parked with cars almost nightly.

The vehicles belong mostly to Umno people, often from outside of Kuala Lumpur, calling on the Minister in groups of up to 10 and often lingering on till late in the night.

The Minister has been receiving streams of such visitors even at his office.

"Morning, afternoon, night ... it's been very, very busy for Datuk," says his aide.

The way many of these visits unfold is typically Malay and Umno.

The Minister, a seasoned Umno leader, knows most of his visitors because of his years as a party leader, so the atmosphere is always relaxed - a combination of small talk, jokes and serious party stuff.

The visitors bring him news about their divisions, and if their divisions have met, they tell him about the nominations made and resolutions passed.

Opinions are exchanged over refreshments and the Minister usually shares his views about national and party issues. And since the Sanggang by-election is on, quite a bit of the conversation has centred on the campaign.

There is no direct campaign pitch. Appeals for support are quite implicit - in the welcome and hospitality the Minister shows to his visitors, in his regard for their feedback and in his articulation of party matters.

The Minister is fortunate because not all hopefuls for posts in the party's May election enjoy this sort of homage. Some have had to be more creative.

A VP aspirant, with more time on his hands, has taken to "visiting his Umno friends" (campaigning has become a somewhat tarnished word in Umno politics) in several States.

He has been seen at the humble warung in several places up north where he has shunned hotels for the simple kampung homes of his friends, eating and praying with them, and even taking baths from the well in the open-air bathrooms that still prevail in some villages.

The contrasting styles of the VP candidates are amusing, to say the least.

A VP hopeful, also a Minister, has relied chiefly on telephone calls to contacts, asking them to "give me a chance" and to put in a good word for him among those they meet.

There are people who are quite willing to do some running around for him but he has told people he is not interested.

Some insist he is too much of a purist about the no-campaign ruling. Others say he is too kedekut (parsimonious) about having to spend money on transport, food and lodging for those helping him.

Whatever the campaigning style, this weekend sees the bulk of the remaining divisional meetings taking place and the nominations that follow will determine who's in and who's out in the VP race.

Half of the 11 names nominated so far have crossed the qualifying mark and several more will probably crest the bar this weekend.

One name still closely watched is Kelantan Umno chief Tengku Razaleigh

Hamzah although he has collected only a handful of nominations so far.

Moreover, Razaleigh has denied reports and he does not intend to go for the top posts even if nominated.

Instead, he claimed that all he said was what he had been saying all along: he has no plans and that it is up to the grassroots to decide.

As far as the Umno crowd is concerned, this means the prince is still in the running - at least, for the VP and supreme council contests since he seems to have missed the boat for the two top posts.

Some think he is unlikely to accept any VP or supreme council nominations.

But those who do suggest that if he does, then he would be jostling with those currently trailing the clear favourites - incumbent VP Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman.

It remains to be seen, really, given the common refrain at divisional level that the nominations will not reflect the way delegates vote on May 11.

A common tale among those campaigning for candidates is that divisional leaders have told them in all frankness that although they could push their divisions to nominate certain candidates, they could not guarantee that delegates from their divisions would vote in those candidates.

Still the fact that Najib and Ghani had pulled so far ahead so early on begs comment.

Najib is not only way ahead but, say his aides, has consistently emerged as the top name among the three VP nominees picked by one division after another the past weeks.

He seems to have finally put behind him the dark spots in his political career to emerge as one of the more credible figures in the future scenario of Umno.

"Najib and Ghani have shown real leadership qualities," says supreme council incumbent and Deputy Information Minister Datuk Khalid Yunus.

Both defended and stood by the party during an extremely challenging period for Umno, something which the true-blue Umno types appreciate.

Party people also admired the way Najib handled his disappointment at not being picked as Deputy Prime Minister last year.

There are also other more practical factors: his seniority in Umno and the Government, his track performance and his fantastic network especially among the Youth wing.

"I would be surprised if he doesn't end up with the most votes as VP," says a Malay businessman with close Umno ties.

Najib's aides like to compare the race to the Formula 1: taking pole position is fine but one still has to work at negotiating those dicey corners ahead.

In that case, Ghani who is a first-time contender for VP has done remarkably well. His supporters say it is his track record, first as a Minister, then as Menteri Besar, his intellect and his unblemished image.

"Ghani also stands out because he is the strongest MB candidate," says Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

Others suggest he was perceived as top-grade VP material after Johor came through unscathed in what was a very difficult general election for Umno.

But if the two top VP posts seem more or less spoken for, the third slot, as Khalid puts it, "is still wide open".

Contenders Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin have been hampered by the strength and popularity of Ghani and have had to canvass for support from outside their own State.

Mentris Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar (Selangor), Datuk Seri Osu Sukam (Sabah) and Tan Sri Mohd Isa Samad (Negri Sembilan) have done quite

well because of their positions as State Umno chiefs.

Former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, despite being an incumbent, is seen to be fighting an uphill battle. Umno is trying to forge a new image and future for itself and he does not seem to fit very well in that scenario.

Although not expected to make it, it is said he will not be shamed in terms of votes.

That the intellectually-inclined and eloquent Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim has not cleared the mark by now has been a matter of some surprise.

One reason could be the fact that fellow Negri Sembilan leader Isa is also in the race; the other could be that his Semangat 46 past is still a few steps behind him.

Previous VP races were often dictated by the fact that one of the posts would go to a candidate with impeccable religious credentials in order to hold up the Umno side to arch-rival Pas.

In 1986, that candidate was Abdullah and before that, Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad of Terengganu. Had Datuk Paduka Dr Hamid Othman made it in the national polls, the post would have been his.

But the talk now is that this role would have to be assumed by Pak Lah who has a religious educational background and comes from a family of well-known religious scholars.

A great deal of the intense attention surrounding the VP race has to do with the fact that party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has indicated that this will be his last term as Prime Minister.

Says Khalid: "Delegates are going to think and think again before they put the `X' on the ballot paper. This contest is not about picking Mr A and throwing out Mr B but about succession for the post-Mahathir era ... we're not only choosing party leaders but the next leadership of the country."

There is also a great deal of talk on the ground about sending a message to the top that Umno has to change with the times, to reinvent itself, reconnect with the young generation, in short, to survive.

Deputy Works Minister Khaled Nordin reckons delegates are likely to use the election of the supreme council to send this message to the top leadership.

"Most delegates see this election as an opportunity for the party to strengthen itself and this can be done through the election of office-bearers who can genuinely serve the party. Otherwise, they have only themselves to blame," he says.

In fact, this was raised a number of times during the closed-door and no holds barred meetings - there were a total of eight altogether - that Dr Mahathir had with divisional heads from various States in Putrajaya a month ago.

Dr Mahathir was told very frankly that the next supreme council must have a mixture of those holding government posts and ordinary party leaders.

The supreme council race had over the years seen a growing bias for those holding government posts, the assumption being that they have more clout to deliver and perform.

Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Menteri Besar may find that it is no longer that easy to walk into the supreme council.

The view has found currency among the grassroots and Johor Baru division head Datuk Shahrir Samad who is among those who have crossed the minimum nominations bar for the supreme council contest is said to be going strongly along this line.

"People (in Umno) want to see grassroots views evaluated alongside that

of the Government. They are also talking about a healthy mix of experience and youth to help generate new ideas and to re-energise Umno," says Bukit Bintang Wanita head Maryani Mohd Yit.

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