

12/05/2000

Results show that Najib has arrived

Joceline Tan

JOURNALISTS who had been expecting a long night after the experience of yesterday's Wanita Umno vote count groaned when permanent chairman Tan Sri Sulaiman Ninam Shah adjourned the sitting at 6.50pm.

He promised that the results for vice-presidents and supreme council would be made public only in two hours time.

The vote-count for contest for three vice-presidents and permanent chairman was done, he said, but vote-tallying for the supreme council race was still on.

By then, however, word had reached the media centre that Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin had won in the nine-man race.

More than a few journalists were stunned, given the way dummies (advanced copies) being banged out on laptops were hastily changed.

Some delegates immediately termed it the "Kubang Pasu formula" - the victors were the same three nominated by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's division.

Others could not help but view the line-up as the "Wawasan Team" - though the 1993 order of line-up had been Najib, Muhammad and Muhyiddin.

The immediate reaction from delegates was varied to say the least, because most of them simply did not quite know what to make of it.

For the first time in a long while, there is no Menteri Besar representative among the VPs leading some to question the influence - or lack of it - among the MBs when it comes to rallying their state delegates.

An Umno Minister said somewhat cautiously: "Seems like a revolt of some kind to me."

More than a few delegates saw the hand of the G7 (the seven delegates elected from each division) in the outcome. The party president's unequivocal admonition against money politics in the past weeks had offended the G7, they claimed.

Said a fallen VP candidate: "If that's the case, then it's as good as voting for money politics."

Najib's top billing was never in doubt although speculation over how the other VP candidates would fare fluctuated erratically in the final two weeks.

By the time Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad completed his 20-page presidential address, the picture had grown even more fuzzy.

New permutations of names for the VPs cropped up so much so that a senior journalist pacing the lobby area of the Dewan Merdeka where the 54th Umno General Assembly when voting was going on, complained: "Don't know what to believe anymore."

A betting pool initiated in the media centre said as much. The composition of victors ranged from the favourite combination of "NGO" (Najib, Ghani (Othman), Osu (Sukam)) to "NGR" (Najib, Ghani, Rais (Yatim)), "NGS" (Najib, Ghani, Syed Hamid (Albar)).

New Straits Times journalists were told by the cheeky pool organiser to put their money on "NST" (Najib, Syed Hamid, Mat Taib).

By the final week, the spin doctors of rival candidates were working so hard that even Ghani's standing, which had consistently not been far behind Najib's, had begun to fluctuate with every telling.

A popular spin making the rounds in the final week was that the PM had

given his sanction to Najib (based on his seniority, experience and loyalty) and Osu (in order to further integrate Sabah Umno into the movement).

As such, Osu's name, which had been linked solely to his intention to abolish the rotation of the Sabah Chief Ministership, began to crop up ever more often.

The victorious Najib had not been complacent although he had zoomed ahead of the rest from the very start, eventually bagging an impressive 150 nominations.

Neither was he taking any chances although everywhere he went in the last few weeks, he had been told, "Datuk, you're alright," an uncanny reminder of the days leading to his narrow win in last year's general election.

Yesterday's sliver of a victory for Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, in spite of her nomination lead over Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, was another reminder.

When met a day before the election, he had smiled in that taciturn manner of his, tapped his heart and said: "I've been through many elections, but the trepidation is still there."

In fact, Najib's staff have been said to be on "Y2K alert" since Monday, on the lookout for potential problems in their set-up.

Even last night, after the supreme council meeting ended at 11pm, he had headed home for a staff briefing that ended only at about 2am. Yet, this morning, he had arrived well before 8am, looking fresh and alert in a sunny yellow baju Melayu.

The vice-president line-up is a fascinating assertion of the will of Umno delegates.

"No doubt about it, Najib is a consensus choice. I think it (the result) also indicates that delegates see him as next-in-line after Pak Lah," said a KL delegate.

Former Selangor Menteri Besar Mat Taib's comeback is remarkable and something which the Umno rank-and-file will probably have to spend much time rationalising in the face of public opinion.

But Mat Taib's political draw and personal charisma has to be seen to be understood and his followers insist he still has much to contribute.

The choice of Muhyiddin, the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister, said a delegate, is more difficult to explain.

But Muhyiddin is seen as outside the leadership's preferred list of candidates and as such, a choice to reflect the delegates' sense of greater check and balance in the party.

Delegates rarely miss a beat when it comes to party matters and they are aware that Najib, the Defence Minister, has the right credentials.

Najib's long and broad track record places him among the party's most experienced whereas his relative youth (he is only 46 despite his mature appearance) puts him in touch with the younger generation within the party.

And his wide lead over the other two places him in an unassailable position when the time arrives for Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to pick his No 2.

If not for anything else, the VP results show that Najib has finally arrived.