

12/03/2000

Subtle campaigning for Umno seats

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GUA Musang MP Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah is a rare sight in Parliament but since the current sitting began last month, the Kelantan prince has been showing up almost every afternoon, staying on for about an hour or so each time.

But last Wednesday, his seat, located in what is known as the horse-shoe section of the House, was conspicuously vacant.

It seems remarkable that an empty seat could attract so much attention but there had been broad speculation that Ku Li, as he is widely known, would be declaring his stand regarding the coming Umno elections that very day.

When he had still not shown up by about 4pm, word spread that if Tengku Razaleigh was not in Parliament, then he must be announcing his candidature at his Jalan Langgak Golf premises.

Nothing like that happened, of course, although the Kelantan prince has since given an interview which was more intriguing for what he did not say than for what he said.

The gist of it seems to be that he is ready to go for it.

The "it" was undefined but it was the clearest indication thus far of his electoral intentions and it remains to be seen how the Umno grassroots interpret and respond to what he has said.

The "Kuli question" has been the sole excitement in what seems otherwise to be a rather sober and low-key take-off to the party election process - a far cry from the 1993 and even the 1996 polls.

"Everything has been very quiet ... but I think that's good," admits Sabah Umno's Datuk Salleh Said.

Or, according to a Malay businessman with formidable Umno connections:

"Very discreet campaigning, meeting in small groups, and a lot of telephone communication."

A large part of it is due to the tough campaign guidelines laid down by the Supreme Council several years ago to curb unhealthy practices.

Umno people still gripe about the rules, but says an aide to a Minister, "people stay in line because nobody wants to risk being caught ... especially those going for the hot posts."

Where aspirants, particularly those holding government posts, once jostled to officiate at divisional meetings and other functions to meet potential delegates, they now settle for small-scale meetings usually in coffeehouses or homes of supporters.

Those important enough receive visitors at home.

For instance, the above Malay businessman who was at the home of a key candidate a week ago noted that the aspiring candidate had invited a few divisional figures over for dinner and a chat.

"It was more social than any hard campaign talk. The idea, usually, is to make them feel comfortable about contesting and any campaigning done at such gathering is very indirect.

"But others probably heard about it because by the time I left, there were about 40 people in the house and (the host's) wife was in the kitchen preparing more food."

And anyone who has driven past vice-presidential (VP) hopeful Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib's posh Kelana Jaya residence the past few weeks would have noticed the cars parked outside his house.

The former Selangor Menteri Besar is apparently back in circulation and

his supporters claim he has received the blessings of top leaders to go for the VP post.

The aim of all candidates at this point is to clinch the nomination, hence, their targets are the main office-bearers of the divisions, namely, the divisional head, deputy head, vice head and Youth and Wanita chiefs. The reason: these top five usually have some influence on the conduct of divisional AGMs and more importantly, the election of another seven delegates to the general assembly.

Once the divisional AGMs are over, another more intense round of campaigning will take place to win over the seven elected delegates or the "G7" as they are known among members.

Since it is rarely possible for most candidates to touch base with all 165 divisions, those with the resources often send out their "boys" or budak-budak, agents and managers as they are variously known.

These are the people who fan out to the different states, drumming up support through face-to-face meetings and making telephone calls to anyone considered relevant.

Assemblywoman and Merbok Wanita head Rosnah Majid has received a number of such calls.

"The handphone has become an important campaign tool."

But the old-fashioned telegram still has its uses. Her division has just received a telegram from a candidate sending his best wishes for the division's coming meeting and urging them among other things "to place the party's interest above that of the individual."

"You'd be surprised. The subtle approach goes down well with the kampung grassroots," says Rosnah with a laugh.

ANOTHER recipient of such calls has been Tambun MP Husni Hanadzlah.

He says: "I take their calls but so far, I've not met up with any of them because I already know who I will support. I would be wasting their time when there is so much work to do."

Many of these calls, says a campaigner for a Minister and VP hopeful, is just to "say 'Hello, don't forget us.'"

"But there's nothing like the personal touch in face-to-face meetings. You've got to treat them like VIPs," says the campaigner.

Candidates insist whatever money coming out of their pockets is being spent on such campaign activity or what they call belanja hangus.

"Honestly, there is no vote buying, just money for campaign machinery," says a key Youth aspirant.

For him, belanja hangus has so far involved hiring about a dozen Proton Iswara for his campaigners, and picking up the bills for their handphones, hotel and meals.

Another Youth candidate says somewhat too earnestly: "Money is not the most important factor of influence this time."

VP candidate and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim begs to differ, claiming that "the ringgit still speaks louder than ideals".

"Money politics is still there. People are using large sums of money to endear themselves to the crowd and I hope the party will do something about it," he says.

Those with the means, he adds, have a serious edge over those like him who do not indulge in money politics.

Asked for specifics, he says it was a general observation on his part as well as from feedback from those sympathetic to him.

Still, there's no denying that money is not flowing the way it did during the 1993 campaign nor does one hear of accounts like junkets to Haadyai or Mecca or gifts of expensive watches and fountain pens.

One candidate who had quietly raised RM300,000 just to secure his

nomination was pleasantly surprised to find that he had only spent about RM80,000 so far. He told friends that if this was 1993, he would have been flushed off by at least RM1 million by now.

He has also been going round exclaiming: "I am thankful to God for that!"

And while some think that the no-campaign rule is stacked against the non-incumbents and new faces, others like Johor Umno's Datuk Shahrir Samad who is eyeing a supreme council seat, suggests that it subdues both the big and small guys though not in as even a way as he would like to see it. "Since big do's are out, everyone has to go out and campaign in a more personalised way but the big guys still have the resources to cover more ground," says Shahrir.

Those associated with Tengku Razaleigh like to claim that the Kelantan figure has no strategy, no operations rooms or even groups going around on the ground on his behalf.

The implication here is that Tengku Razaleigh is above the hurly-burly of the race and that if duty beckons, then he will respond accordingly. Such claims tend to draw raised eyebrows of disbelief from most people who say there are groups out there soliciting for his candidature.

Or as a Youth figure puts it: "The American word for that is `Bullshit!'"

The figure also suggests that the Promenade Hotel in Kota Kinabalu and Ming Court and Mandarin KLCC have become meeting points for Kuli supporters and campaigners.

Another aspect of this year's campaign is the relative absence of poison-pen letters. Past party elections were often heralded by a flurry of such letters even before nomination could begin.

But says a supporter of a VP candidate: "It's still early. Wait till the nominations are over and the real race begins."

There is also the view that the calm political waters now are largely due to the absence of contest - to date, that is - for the president's and deputy president's posts.

But this view, it ought to be said, belongs largely to those staunchly behind the Supreme Council's advice of a no-contest for the two top posts. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the Umno grassroots, especially those in the rural areas where the Umno bedrock still lies, are deeply apprehensive of the prospects and consequences of another big fight.

Kelantan politician Alwi Che Ahmad puts it this way: "The point is, many of us know that Dr Mahathir is unlikely to stay on for another general election and we think he should be allowed to decide when to go after this. Let him decide and let us have a smooth transition."

It does not take much to see that the attention surrounding Tengku Razaleigh has less to do with people wanting him as their leader as with the fact that a segment in Umno see him as the outlet for them to channel their frustrations over what they think has gone awry with the party.

At the same time there is no denying that there are people who genuinely want to see Tengku Razaleigh play a role in Umno but, again, they feel it should not be at the expense of a bruising battle.

All these questions are likely to be weighed over and over again as the divisions make their way through their meetings from now until April.

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