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The question is who you vote for - not who you want

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KUALA Lumpur throbs with life, it is not a city of fear, and the ruling party is dismaying the opponents: it is lively and roaring. It put the Opposition in despair by winning the Sanggang by-election, and it will help the MIC win the Teluk Kemang parliamentary by-election. Umno is "reforming" itself although by design it receives no publicity because it is in conflict with the popular stereotype.

Umno elections will be held on Wednesday for Wanita and Pemuda and for the three vice presidents and 25 Supreme Council seats the day after. Nothing new or exciting you might think, except that the winners of Thursday's vice presidential poll will be the next leaders after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

All I can say is we should not set our expectations too high. However, there will be openness in the debate, and there will be accountability; key elements at an Umno General Assembly.

There is not much in the way of change that can be expected on the Wanita front unless Wanita Umno realises that its leadership as constituted is disunited and too much time has been lost due to infighting in the last three years.

What Wanita Umno needs is true women leaders who are in tune with the needs of emerging Malaysian women and courageous enough to challenge injustices when they see them. They must be, if possible, original and creative and who think of high office as simply a means to do good and not an end in itself. Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is an old horse, but a hard working one, while Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, though she created an upset three years ago by beating Rafidah, is a filly. Both Rafidah and Zaharah can be utterly callous sometimes. But the most important thing is result, and Rafidah does perform well in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. Rafidah is expected to regain the leadership of the Wanita wing of Umno although Zaharah is fighting hard to deny her that. The tudung (head scarf) has become a big issue between Zaharah and Rafidah - to the detriment of their ability and potential. Zaharah now wears the tudung!

As Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein has won the Youth leader's post uncontested, attention has turned to the race for the number two spot between a businessman and an actuarist - Datuk Abdul Aziz Sheik Fadzir, a nouveau riche and Zein Isma Ismail of Kluang, Johor. Both were "banished" overseas by Hishamuddin in the run-up to Wednesday's election. Rumours have it that Zein went on umrah (minor pilgrimage) while Aziz went to Mecca but via Bollywood. This Bollywood business may be the work of Aziz's opponents.

Since Dr Mahathir and Abdullah have won the presidency and deputy presidency uncontested, attention has turned to the three vice presidents' posts. Of the nine candidates - the favourites, it appears, are Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Razak, an incumbent and Minister of Defence, and Datuk Seri Panglima Osu Sukam, Chief Minister of Sabah, and the state's Umno chieftain who delivered Sabah during the last general elections. The third slot, I believe, will go to one of the Menteri Besar contesting - Selangor's Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, Johor's Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and Negeri Sembilan's durable state Umno chief, Tan Sri Isa Samad. They, like Osu, are first timers.

The other candidates are Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar,

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, Tan Sri Muhamad Taib, an incumbent - he won the post when he was Menteri Besar of Selangor, and the Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin. Of these, only Syed Hamid and Rais have never won in their previous attempts. All nine candidates are going for broke - all are running for vice presidential seats only. The six losers will be out of the Supreme Council. The candidate who polls a decent fourth place is normally appointed to the Council by the president. The president has the power to appoint the secretary general, treasurer and information chief and 10 ordinary members, bringing the Supreme Council members to 45.

If the majority of the 2018 delegates at the 54th General Assembly consider geopolitics, let common sense prevail and heed the "advice" of the elders, then the results would be as I expect them to be. The inclusion of Osu in the national leadership is perhaps to be welcomed. We are not mistaken in assuming that Najib should easily coast to yet another term in Umno's third echelon leadership.

All the nine candidates are the President's Men. The delegates have a wide range of candidates to pick from on Thursday. All are credible, even if not impressive. To be sure, the delegates have made mistakes before: Poor performance has grounded one who seemed like a workhorse, misjudgements have hastened a premature retirement, a third was sacked for alleged sexual misconduct while a tainted and discredited incumbent is defending his post. The delegates should not have a tough time picking the "three vice heirs". They must choose the three best candidates who in their opinion are perceived to be suitable to work with the president and also to strike a geographical balance in which an important state powerhouse should not feel left out simply because it is a new territory.

The clock is ticking at the residences of the nine vice presidential candidates. The outcome of the elections - which will be cheered by many and put others in despair - may be the political death-knell for all political hopes of the six losers. For sure, for one or two a comeback is unlikely.

The Umno General Assembly, planned to coincide with its 54th birthday, is being held at a time when the party is no longer fighting for its life following last November's general elections. Quite the reverse. The Opposition parties, except for Pas, appear to be on the wane. The economy, under Tun Daim's stewardship, though not ruddy-cheeked in excellent health, is surging ahead, with many analysts predicting a bright future.

The question now is how Umno can make life better for itself, at least in the three or four years that stand between now and the next general elections. The answer is simple: Continuous dialogue with people of all the races and improving the quality of the party's conversation with the Bumiputera electorate and the IT and K-economy generation.

Now, it appears only Dr Mahathir and Abdullah are going around to meet the people. More credible Umno ministers, Menteri Besar and younger leaders should go down to the grassroots the way they did during the Sanggang by-election, and I hope, it is repeated during the Teluk Kemang parliamentary by-election even though MIC is contesting. The Teluk Kemang electorate is made up of 52 per cent non-Malays and 48 per cent Bumiputeras. BN is expected to be able to defend the seat easily.

If I may say so here, Umno needs to smarten up the way it talks and listens which means an effort to explain itself, its programmes and goals in clearer, and, more importantly, less defensive language. The best defence is always to attack. Umno must start to make sense of its assertion that it is a progressive and forward-looking political force - something more positive and a better alternative than the forces of Islamic extremism.

Whatever people may say about Dr Mahathir, most will agree that he is a good listener like the physician he was (and is). He is ready to listen. Whether he agrees is another story. Lesser leaders should be good listeners like Dr Mahathir. They all should listen to well-meaning critics, the ones who wish Umno and the Government well but wish they would do better in fighting corruption, promoting good governance and improving the state of our schools and universities. On May 11, Umno leaders should remember their candid friends for as they surely know, they are the best friends of Umno's Government. The party and Government must become more "critic-friendly".

Democracy, as understood in the party, means that the delegates can vote for whom they like but the tradition is they choose who will be able to work and cooperate with the president, deputy president, the treasurer and the secretary general. The underlying criterion is their suitability under the prevailing circumstances since none really outshines the other. Suitability and realpolitik are going to determine the elections: These always do.

Umno elections tend to be advantageous - not always true as there have been exceptions - to candidates who hold government posts. Dr Mahathir twice polled the highest votes in the Supreme Council elections when he was not in government. Syed Nasir Ismail became a vice president beating Khir Johari, a strong incumbent and the Minister of Trade and Industry, during the 1971 Umno elections. Umno elections have always been scrupulously fair and free, and this year's will be even more so because it must not only be transparent but also seen to be so.

I shall not try to take away the punchbowl just as the party is really swinging on Thursday evening but I hazard a guess that, all being well, everything will proceed smoothly. All candidates, including the 63 fighting for the 25 seats on the Supreme Council, have pledged on oath that they will not "practise money politics, corrupt practices or engage in corrupt practices" - a promise easy to make but hard to keep. Still, many sneaky campaign practices have occurred - no more worse than what usually happens during the United Nations Security Council elections.

Umno, not unlike the New Labour Party in the UK, has influence over patronage. It remains strong and as great as ever, like that practised by the ruling parties in Japan, India and the US. Umno has no need to apologise or anything to be ashamed of. All ruling parties everywhere do that, too, in varying degrees.

On the evening of May 11, I expect a new state leader to be catapulted into the national limelight, making him a probable deputy prime minister, even a potential prime minister, and altering the political landscape within a decade.

All too often certain facts are too easily forgotten, in an age when people conveniently forget history, that Umno has forged unity, maintained peace and prosperity since Independence. When we have a system that has served Malaysians so well, we should all, irrespective of race or political belief, fight hard to protect the system.

This, in essence, is the significance of Umno's elections on Thursday for all Malaysians. The Opposition, in various guises, has tried time and again to replace Umno and its partners and failed each time. They will try again in 2004 or whenever the 11th general elections is called.

Though ahead of time for years, Malaysian voters - especially those voting for the first time - will be well-advised to remember the old limerick about the young lady (the electorate) from Riga (Malaysia)

"Who rode with a smile on a tiger (the Opposition);

"They returned from the ride with the lady inside,

"And the smile on the face of the tiger."

The Opposition is like the tiger which offers a deadly ride. Malaysians should think seriously about their values, priorities and religious harmony.

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