

08/03/2000

Trying to `read' anything significant from proceedings so far

Ahmad A. Talib

WHAT can be concluded from last week's Umno divisional meetings? Umno watchers and players huddled in coffee houses and teh tarek stalls trying to see if they could "read" anything significant from the proceedings. It's also interesting to note that the party's Supreme Council met on Monday, just one day after the first round of divisional meetings were held.

The first round of divisional meetings showed that nominations for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Umno president and deputy president respectively remain solid as all 17 divisions which met so far named them for the two posts.

While Umno watchers waited to see if Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah would be nominated for either one of the two top posts, the Kelantan Umno chief was nominated for the vice-presidency instead, a position he is not unfamiliar with, having been one for seven years from 1974.

The nomination came from the Grik division headed by Perak liaison chairman and Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali.

The nomination for Tengku Razaleigh came after Tajol Rosli, together with Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim (Perlis) and Datuk Syed Razak Syed Zain (Kedah), had agreed on Friday to ask divisions in their States to nominate the Kelantan prince for vice-president.

While it may be too early to conclude anything definite from the meetings, one fact stands clear - there seems to be a clear adherence to the advice given by the Supreme Council vis-a-vis the top two posts. There were, however, attempts to put up different candidates but this was squashed.

One was in Benut, Johor. Attempts by some Umno delegates at the Sungai Benut division meeting on Sunday to nominate Ku Li, as he's fondly referred to, as party president failed owing to lack of support.

Ku Li was also proposed as deputy president but this was also thrown out.

In Segamat, Tan Sri Musa Hitam, one time deputy prime minister and deputy president of Umno, was proposed as a candidate for the number one post. But this too did not materialise.

When it was put to a vote, Musa managed only 37 votes while Dr Mahathir, who was also proposed, pulled in 202. As reported, all committee members of the division voted for Dr Mahathir.

For the record, Pak Lah also scored with maximum number of nominations thus far.

From these statistics, it looks like divisions are heeding the supreme council's advice, reflecting what some senior party leaders say as a clear indication that unity must prevail in the party.

The proposal that Ku Li be nominated for vice president would surely have triggered fresh discussions among Umno grassroot leaders and members. Tengku Razaleigh, speculated in some quarters as a potential contender for one of the top two posts, must surely weigh this new development carefully.

With his experience, in and outside the party, Tengku Razaleigh, even as a vice president, can still contribute to Umno.

As an elected member of the supreme council, Tengku Razaleigh can take his rightful place in the party's highest decision-making body, besides the annual general assembly.

Some party leaders offer an opinion that the proposal to nominate Tengku Razaleigh as vice president was actually an attempt to seek a "compromise", though others argue that the question of "compromise" does not arise.

Why should it be seen as a "compromise" when Tengku Razaleigh has not even indicated his interest to vie for any top post, they asked.

But including him in the VP line-up would probably ensure his position in the supreme council, if he wins in the election, that is.

How would others vying for the VP post feel following this new proposal? Incumbents Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who managed to get 16 divisions so far to nominate him, must surely feel quite relieved even though he would still want to make sure these nominations are translated into votes come May 11.

The same goes for Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, Johor liaison chief and Menteri Besar, who managed 13 nominations so far. Others aspiring to become vice president must also be doing some calculations now.

Two well-known and familiar names in the Umno hierarchy - Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sti Muhammad Muhammad Taib - are waiting anxiously for the other divisions to meet, having yet to secure a single nomination to their name. It is still too early to dismiss their inclusion as both are known to have sizeable followings.

Delegates to the May assembly would already be looking at various options when making their final decisions. They would probably be looking at a certain formula so that whoever is chosen eventually would be able to serve the long-term interest of the party.

(END)