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Umno elections shaping up to be the political event of the year

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EVERYONE'S watching. And many will also be asking - will the May Umno elections see a split in the party acknowledged as the mainstay in the ruling Barisan Nasional?

Among the watchers, some will have direct access to what is going on, and will be directly involved in the election process.

After the Nov 29 general election, all eyes will now be on the party elections. Starting last Thursday, Umno divisions begin their general meeting as a run-up to the annual assembly.

These meetings are just as important because delegates to the May election will be chosen here.

The May assembly has the added excitement of the election of office bearers serving the supreme council. The 40-member council is the highest decision-making body in the party, where policies are made. Sometimes, political careers can either take off or take a dip.

Even without an election, the assembly has always been closely followed by those within and outside Umno. There is always some form of excitement or other. This year's assembly will probably see passionate debates on issues affecting the party, particularly its performance in the last general election.

Umno lost some high-profile seats in that election and many members would want to share their thoughts on this at the assembly. Questions will be raised as to how and why Jeli, Parit, Besut, Setiu, Cukai and Sik were lost to the Opposition.

Besides a forum where they can let off steam and speak their mind, the assembly will also be a good opportunity for the party leaders to do some talent spotting and pick new ideas which merit implementation. But the main item on the agenda will, of course, be the election and the debates. But no matter how heated the debates, the focus of attention will still be the election of office-bearers. Many will agree that this will probably be the year's main event in the domestic political calendar. Well before the assembly proper, the excitement is already being felt.

To date, nine candidates have already declared their intention to bid for the three vice presidential seats up for election. There are five VP seats altogether, but one each is reserved for the Youth and Wanita wings. Down the line, 25 supreme council seats are offered, and there's a total of 55 aspirants already.

The supreme council at its meeting on Jan 4 had issued an advisory which has stirred some debate among members. The council had advised members that the top two posts in the party not be contested, on the grounds that a contest would split the party. This, many argued, should be avoided. The advice would mean that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad should continue to serve as party president and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a vice president carrying out the duties of deputy president, be nominated to fill the vacancy. Abdullah, fondly referred to as Pak Lah, has given a good account of himself when carrying out the duties of the number two and should be allowed to carry on unchallenged. His appointment as Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister suggests a growing confidence in his abilities.

While some continue to debate the pros and cons of the advice, the spotlight in recent weeks fell on Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the chairman of Umno's liaison committee in Kelantan. In fact, ever since his return to

the Umno fold, Ku Li, as he is fondly referred to, has seldom not gained from some kind of attention or other.

Some people seem to believe that if there's going to be a challenge for either one of the top two posts, the challenger would be the Kelantan prince. Call it what you may, Tengku Razaleigh has considerable charm in attracting people, even when results of the last general election where he failed to win back Kelantan suggest otherwise.

It is interesting to note that Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, now Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and one-time deputy president of Parti Melayu Semangat 46 which Tengku Razaleigh formed after he left Umno in 1988, had some comments to make on the possibility of a contest for the two top posts.

Rais said Umno could ill-afford a contest like the one in 1987 when Tengku Razaleigh took on Dr Mahathir in a 'go for broke' battle. As it turned out, Dr Mahathir prevailed by 43 votes, forcing Ku Li to challenge the decision in court.

The court declared Umno illegal, only to resume its activities soon after, minus Tengku Razaleigh who moved on to form Semangat 46. Semangat 46 failed to gain ground and is now buried in the history books of Malaysian politics as a splinter group which served a few but not the nation.

Even a Japanese newspaper had shown interest in Tengku Razaleigh's yes-or-no decision, forcing the latter to issue a denial on Thursday. The Japanese newspaper ran a report which quoted Tengku Razaleigh as saying that he would free Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim if he became Prime Minister. (Anwar, former Deputy Prime Minister and deputy president of Umno, is in jail after the High Court found him guilty of corrupt practice).

Tengku Razaleigh had on Feb 12 issued another denial through his aide, Ahmad Shabery Chik. He said that a written statement suggesting that he was prepared to be nominated to contest the presidential post was not issued by him. But even this failed to stop political observers and students of political science from scrutinising every move made by the prince.

One can only assume that Tengku Razaleigh was still weighing the pros and cons of that supreme council advice. The longer he takes to openly declare his intention the more it would fuel speculation that he is actually planning and plotting a high-risk battle that may trigger a split even before the election is held.

It is inevitable that a top-gun contest would cause party members to take sides. Many are arguing that at a time when Umno should be repairing and bringing its house to order after a bruising general election, a contest for the top posts would yield more harm than good. This, then, is the issue before the 165 divisions as they meet to nominate candidates to determine the party hierarchy.

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