

03/01/2000

Umno Supreme Council to fix dates for assembly, party polls today

Ramlan Said

UMNO, the backbone of the Barisan Nasional, is up for another test soon - election of office bearers in the supreme council.

While the Nov 29 general election which was held last year was important in allowing the people to choose the Government, the Umno polls are equally vital as it involves electing the party's key decision-makers.

While party members are making preparations for that, others outside the party are also caught up in the excitement.

This is an election which is closely followed within and outside the party.

"One should realise the importance of the decision that's going to be made by the party delegates. They are actually choosing the future leaders of this country," as one senior MCA leader observed.

It is hard not to agree with this as Umno's top echelons equal the country's top leaders.

By convention, the Umno president and deputy president have always become the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister.

Besides, two-thirds of the Cabinet Ministers' posts are usually held by Umno, not to mention the posts of Deputy Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries.

Umno is, after all, the mainstay of the ruling coalition.

"The party election may be Umno's internal affair but I feel all Malaysians, irrespective of their race or religion, have a stake in it as it is actually a process of determining the leaders of the country," said the same MCA leader.

Umno delegates to the assembly should take note of their heavy responsibility when casting their votes.

The Umno supreme council, the party's highest decision-making body, is expected to fix the dates of the general assembly and election for party posts when it meets today.

There are signs that the assembly may be held much earlier than June, and several top party leaders have openly expressed desire for this.

Last week, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a vice-president who is carrying out the duties of the party deputy president, said he preferred the assembly be held earlier.

This would reduce internal politicking while giving delegates an opportunity to discuss the November general election while it is still fresh in their minds.

Abdullah had already issued a warning to aspirants not to be over-zealous when campaigning.

Also agreeing to an early assembly is party secretary-general Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob, who said that discussions on the general elections are best done when the issue is still hot.

Some observers are looking at an April assembly, basing their calculations on the time needed for branches and divisions to conclude their meetings and nominate candidates.

By then, a clear picture on possible contests for the various party posts will emerge although intense lobbying by aspiring candidates are said to have already started.

The spotlight on this year's election will certainly be on the deputy president's post, the three vice-president's seats and the heads of the Youth and Wanita wings.

However, a contest for the seat formerly held by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim may not materialise if a no-contest proposal for the posts of president and deputy president is adopted by the supreme council.

This happened in the last party election when the party decided well in advance that there should not be any contest for both positions.

But there is a big difference this time around - with Anwar sacked from the party in September 1998, the deputy president's post is now vacant.

Thus, the party has to work out a formula if it wants to avoid a contest for the number two post.

If there is one thing that is certain, party president and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will not be challenged.

He has indicated his willingness to defend his seat if re-nominated, and there already are expressions asking him to continue to lead the party.

Abdullah is also tipped to continue to be the party's number two, and the assembly may endorse his position.

Abdullah currently holds one of the three vice-president's seats but has been entrusted by the supreme council to assume the duties of deputy president, a move which has given him the edge over other candidates.

It is still too early to see whether a battle for the number two post is on the cards, but several familiar names have already sounded out their willingness to make a bid for one of three vice-presidential posts.

Incumbent vice-presidents are Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and former Selangor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, who has been on leave from performing his duties following his corruption trial.

It is interesting to see whether Muhammad, who has been acquitted, will defend his seat.

The supreme council is expected to make some important decisions when it meets today.

This is the first meeting for the new millennium and its decisions can have far-reaching implications on the party and the country.

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