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Unity versus choice at Umno polls

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"IF" has once again become a favourite catch-word among Umno leaders. More and more are shifting into the "if mode".

"If nominated I will contest" is becoming a standard refrain as the date for the party's supreme council election approaches. More often than not, it is an euphemism for "please nominate me for I am dying to contest".

It is the Malay way of hiding one's real intention so as not to appear that he or she is hard up for a position.

Politically, it is a signal to the divisions to say that he or she is available for nomination to contest a certain council post. Of course, some contenders are less modest than others and will state the post he or she is after.

Thus, several Ministers and Menteri Besar had openly indicated that they are available for nomination to contest the post of vice-presidents.

Those who had made their intention public included Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, and Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

Others are less forthright, saying that they are watching the situation before offering themselves for nomination, but are equally active in sending out feelers.

The council's decision on Monday to bring this year's general assembly forward to May 11-13 and to advise members not to promote a challenge for the two top posts - president and deputy president - will not do much to dampen the leadership race.

On its part, the 35-member governing body of the party had unanimously decided to renominate Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to retain the number one post and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi for the deputy president's seat.

Given the party's lacklustre performance in the November general election and the ensuing calls for its leaders to listen more to the people, the only acceptable justification for the council's decision is party unity.

Umno needs unity to recover from the electoral shock. Without unity, the party is in danger of sliding further. It cannot afford any form of acrimony.

Of course, there is nothing to stop some party members from seeing the decision as an interference with their democratic right.

With the benefit of hindsight, one can argue that the council's decision to renominate Dr Mahathir as president and Abdullah to fill the vacant deputy president's job was quite unnecessary.

It would be sufficient for the council to advise party members not to promote a challenge for the two top posts. In that manner, nobody can accuse the council of interfering with the party's democratic ideals and, at the same time, discourage a challenge for the two positions.

Still, there will be sufficient opportunity for members to make their feelings known, particularly when Dr Mahathir himself repeatedly stressed that the no-contest decision was not binding.

EVEN without the council's advice, the president's post is unlikely to be challenged.

It has become an Umno tradition that a serving president, who is seen as being in the final lap of his career, is allowed the luxury of making his

own decision instead of being shown the door.

Two previous presidents - Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra and Tun Hussein Onn - stepped down at the end of their prime ministerial careers. Tun Abdul Razak died in office.

A challenge against a party president would normally take place early in his tenure. Tunku was opposed by C.M. Yusuf and Ahmad Fuad in 1951, the year he took over from Datuk Onn Jaafar.

Tun Hussein was challenged by Sulaiman Palestin in 1978, two years after he became Prime Minister and Dr Mahathir by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in 1987.

Any challenge this time around would be for the deputy president's post which is vacant. Aspirants are less inhibited to offer themselves for the post as they cannot be accused of trying to take the job away from anyone.

Even so, Abdullah's chances of being given a walkover are greater than the possibility of a contest. A challenge, if there is one, may not come from a heavyweight; it is likely to be a proxy fight aimed more at embarrassing him than to deprive him of the post.

Politically, it is good for Abdullah to legitimise his claim to the post by facing a contest as previous Deputy Prime Ministers had done upon being promoted to the position.

After all, Abdullah is not new to party contests. He had even won in the most extraordinary circumstances when the party line was for him not to be elected.

The Deputy Prime Minister's job, which he has been holding since January last year, should give him an edge should there be a contest. Furthermore, he has also been performing the duties of deputy president since last February.

With Abdullah almost certain to be confirmed in the number two job, with or without contest, the focus is shifted to the three vice-president's posts.

There will be two clear vacancies in the V-P line-up, assuming that the incumbent, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, will be defending his position, which is a certainty.

Since the last party election in 1996, one of the three elected vice-presidents Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, the former Selangor Menteri Besar, was directed by the supreme council to go on leave on April 14, 1997, after he was charged with failing to declare RM2.4 million at Australia's Brisbane International Airport on Dec 22, 1996.

It must be put on record that Muhammad, despite being cleared of currency and corruption charges by the courts in Australia and Malaysia respectively, had not reclaimed the V-P post.

He was asked by the council to take leave from the party and Government following his arrest in Australia in 1997 on currency charges. He said a few days ago that he is willing to recontest the post if nominated.

BEFORE the supreme council made its stand, there was talk that any challenge against Abdullah for the position of deputy president would come from Najib and, to a lesser degree, Razaleigh, the Kelantan liaison chief.

Although Najib did not do particularly well in the general election, he may not have any trouble getting the divisional nominations for the contest.

He and others may still be nominated. But it will be hard for Najib to justify taking on Abdullah, having been a party to Monday's no-contest decision.

Najib and Razaleigh could be counted as potential candidates for the number two post had the general election results been more favourable to them.

The field has also shrunk following the defeat of several senior party

leaders in the election and the reshuffles made to the State and Federal Cabinets.

This, some insiders hope, will pave the way for the nomination and, hopefully, the election of younger and dynamic leaders to the council. The party's governing body can benefit from the infusion of young blood. Also, it is good for the party to have younger leaders who are not weighed down by the baggage of the past.

Unity aside, Umno cannot overlook the need for rejuvenation. The role of younger leaders and women representatives has to be recognised. Infusion of new blood deserves consideration.

A free and open party election will not only convince party members that changes are taking place but, more importantly, Umno must convince the young Malays that it is still the best choice for them.

By the year 2004-2005, when the general election is due, there will be as many as two million new voters, the majority of whom will be young, educated and economically-empowered Malays.

There is, of course, the danger that some contestants may resort to money politics or use party elections to shore up their sagging fortunes following their poor performance in the general election.

The Malays had split in the general election. Another split in the Umno election will weaken the community's political standing further. This cannot be good for them and the country as a whole.

But to put a brake on the democratic practice of the party because of fears of money politics and unbridled competition cannot also be good for Umno and the Malays.

It is better for the party to take the bull by the horns.

SO much for Pas' Islamic justice, transparency and accountability. State employees and the poor are being thrown out into the cold, days before the Aidilfitri celebrations for their alleged political leaning.

These are not top Umno and Barisan Nasional supporters but ordinary workers, the poor, the invalids and widows.

Some 400 employees of the Yunit Perpaduan Ummah (Community Solidarity Unit), a Terengganu Government agency, were sacked on the pretext that their contracts had expired. A new agency called Yunit Pembangunan Insan (Human Development Unit) was formed and, presumably, staffed by Pas members and supporters.

Another 45,000 recipients of the State's zakat (tithe) assistance were struck off the list simply because they were selected by the former BN Government.

This is what happens when keadilan (justice), ketelusan (transparency) and kebertanggungjawaban (accountability) are defined by hypocritical politicians and not by the words of God.

They spoke of Islamic justice, yet they punished even the ordinary civil servants and the poor for their alleged political affiliations.

Perhaps Terengganu Pas leaders, who include a former Lord President and liberal professionals, would have acted more humanely had they received a Hari Raya card from a Kuala Lumpur-based Chinese-controlled conglomerate.

On the cover of the card is written the following surah (verses) of the Quran: "Read, in the name of thy Lord who creath. Creath man from a clot of blood. Read, and thy Lord is the most bountiful, He who hath taught by the pen. Teacheth man what he knew not." (al-'Alaq).

Unless of course they do not consider Allah's first words to Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) as important.

They should also consider the legality of channelling the zakat, which belongs to the State, through Pas' branch heads instead of the Religious Affairs Department as was the practice of the previous BN Government.

And I certainly find the company's Hari Raya greetings more in tune with

Islam than the following stickers found on the rear windscreen of a four-wheel drive vehicle parked in Bangsar a few days ago:

"Allah is just a prayer away. Islam most forgiving. Don't get caught dead without Islam."

It is not Islam that is forgiving. It is Allah. This is what happens when Islam is politicised and commercialised.

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