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V-P race results reflect grassroots' desire not to be taken for granted

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TOP vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak could barely walk three steps in the PWTC without someone stopping him to shake his hand, offer congratulations and to pose for photographs with him.

He was probably walking on air, anyway. Few could remember the last time any V-P had come through riding a lead as broad as his in Thursday's race - more than 500 votes and about the equivalent of votes from 40 divisions.

Even his press secretary, the cute-looking Tengku Sarifuddin Ahmad, was congratulated everywhere he went in the PWTC.

Actually, the congratulatory swing for Najib had begun as early as last evening after the results were known. Supporters were waiting for him when he got home at 11pm after acknowledging his victory at the Dewan Merdeka.

And as night slipped into early morning, the well-wishers swelled to about 400, prompting the lady of the house Datin Seri Rosmah Majid to send out for take-away Kentucky Fried Chicken and roti canai.

The scene at the homes of the other two V-Ps was no different. Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, for instance, seemed still dazed over his victory as supporters and friends streamed into his Lucky Garden home.

It is possible that he, and for that matter, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, were as surprised as many others over the outcome of the V-P contest.

But even as supporters of the winning V-Ps are rejoicing, others are still trying to figure out how the race turned out the way it did. And one of them is probably party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Many at the assembly today seemed under the impression that since the line-up fit the "Kubang Pasu formula", it must have been endorsed by the Prime Minister.

"I don't buy it. Delegates just changed their minds in the final hours ... in the case of the V-Ps as well as the supreme council," said Deputy Human Resources Minister and Johor delegate Dr Latiff Ahmad.

Former Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa added: "I don't think the PM ever indicated that he supported any individual. He has remained neutral throughout."

Journalists covering the customary dinner hosted by the party president at the PWTC Thursday night noted the serious, almost solemn look on his face as he perused the two sheets containing the results of the V-P and supreme council contests brought to him just as dinner was almost over.

When he finally realised that people were looking on, he straightened up, tried to smile and got up to go only to find reporters surrounding him.

Those who know the PM insist that delegates had either missed or knowingly went against the message couched in his presidential address yesterday.

"I listened to the PM's speech," said an Umno member and corporate figure. "They couldn't have not understood the message of a leadership getting ready to grasp the mettle of reform."

The party, he said, needed leaders who could defend the party, not leaders whom the party had to defend.

In fact, an elderly party stalwart was so stunned by the result that he immediately left the PWTC for home.

Others, defending the line-up, say delegates want "people they know and like, who come from the grassroots and who have stayed down to earth".

But again, no one listening to the debate so far could have missed the frank and direct tone of the speakers.

"I had never been to a general assembly that was so political, where they had been this critical ... but I stress, critical yet respectful," said a 40-something delegate from Kuala Lumpur.

If a conclusion could be drawn of the delegates' mood at this mid-way stage, it would be that they want a party structure that is truly representative of and responsive to the needs, desires and aspirations of the Malay grassroots.

And a great deal of this resentment seemed directed at the leadership from the Menteris Besar and supreme council upwards.

For some time now, there has been a discernible feeling among the grassroots for leaders who are more in touch with how the grassroots feel, who are not afraid to articulate the views of the ordinary Umno member even if it goes against that of the top leadership.

And all this seems to be filtering out at this general assembly - whether through the debate or in the way the delegates voted.

For instance, a delegate pointed out how the supreme council tended to leave everything to the president, whether in expressing opinions or defending the party.

The extent to which they feel that the top echelon is not playing its role could be seen in the critique by a delegate who ticked off ministers who were afraid to put up stickers of Hidup Umno on their cars.

MBS rejected by the delegates in this year's elections were asked to resign.

That delegates feel that supreme council members are only interested in preserving their own positions and interests, was aptly articulated by the delegate who said that, "when you cut the cake (a three-tier cake to commemorate Umno's 54th year), share it with us".

"The supreme council chaps took most of the direct hits," said the Kuala Lumpur delegate.

It is also clear that delegates no longer want the supreme council to comprise mainly Cabinet members because that seems to compromise them from speaking up.

The other message being beamed up by the delegates is that the PM is listening too much to the MBs.

"I can feel a lot of frustration among delegates. They want the party to control the Government. I think the election results show that they want leaders who have their ears and feet on the ground," said Rural Development Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid.

Those who have been covering Umno general assemblies from way back say that speakers this year seem to be speaking their minds rather than just saying things which the top leaders want to hear.

It is no secret that speeches had often been tailored by the State Umno liaison chiefs (who are often also the MBs) whose main aim was usually to get on the good side of the party president.

"The frank mood on the debate floor augurs well for the party. The point is how to translate all this into action," said the above KL delegate.

Annuar who delivered a 40-minute straight-from-the-cuff speech this morning, said when met at the lobby: "Delegates want the leadership to listen and pay attention to the grassroots. And they want to see changes and improvements at various levels.

"And they don't like to be told who to vote for."

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