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Waiting game for Umno's vice president hopefuls

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FOR a party that does not seem to have much affection for the NGOs (non-governmental organisations), it is quite perplexing to hear some Umno members going around saying that it is time for the NGO to rule.

But be baffled no more, for this NGO has nothing to do with the groups of citizenry fighting for human rights, the environment or child abuse.

It is an acronym coined to denote Najib, Ghani and Osu - three of the nine candidates vying for Umno vice presidency at the polls today.

An insider says the acronym had nothing to do with campaigning, which has been banned, but is more a reflection of how members rate the chances of the candidates.

It is not surprising that they rate Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman as the frontrunners in the vice presidency race, given the fact that they received the highest number of nominations - 150 and 80, respectively.

However, for Chief Minister Datuk Seri Osu Sukam to be included is quite a surprise as he came in only fourth in terms of nominations - 38.

If nominations were the yardstick, then the acronym should have been the less inspiring NGA instead of NGO, as the candidate with the third highest nominations is Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, with 58.

As such, it is obvious that Osu's inclusion in the top three vice presidents slot has nothing to do with nominations.

On that score, others have an even chance of making the cut as their nominations are not that fewer than that of Najib, Ghani, Abu Hassan or Osu.

After Osu, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar has a creditable 34 nominations.

Not far behind are former Selangor menteri besar Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, with 32, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, with 30, Negeri Sembilan Menteri Besar Tan Sri Isa Samad, with 28, and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, with 21.

Nominations aside, all the candidates, in their own right, are generally qualified to offer themselves to the delegates for consideration.

Najib, for starters, has the pedigree, being the son of the late Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's illustrious second prime minister.

Pushed into the political limelight early in life, Najib became the youngest ever menteri besar in the country when he was appointed the executive head of Pahang aged only 29.

He scored the highest votes in the 1996 Umno elections for vice presidency and will want to repeat the performance as it will strengthen his bid to be next in line to assume deputy presidency in the post-Mahathir era.

Ghani, on the other hand, though new to Umno politics when compared with the other candidates, has shown some maturity by keeping a firm grip on Johor Umno, known for being difficult to handle given the many independent-minded "chieftains" in the state.

Next is Abu Hassan who sits on the highest perch of Selangor administration. Though not someone who inspires excitement, he has managed to keep the propellers of the state, where numerous national projects are located, moving.

Syed Hamid is another candidate of pedigree, given the fact that he is

the son of the late "Lion of Umno", Tan Sri Syed Jaafar Albar.

However, he has not been very successful in contests for Umno posts in previous party elections.

But Syed Hamid has the maturity of a seasoned campaigner who can be an anchor in the system.

Former Selangor menteri besar and incumbent Muhammad proved to be a dark horse in the last two elections.

In the 1996 assembly, many wrote him off as incapable of defending his post but he managed to squeeze through.

An affable and down-to-earth person, Muhammad has worked hard to prove himself a true Umno man.

However, his case of not declaring the millions in cash he carried to Australia in 1997, though cleared by the courts, remains his biggest stumbling block.

To many, allowing him back into the party can tarnish its image.

While Muhammad has to deal with his excess baggage, Muhyiddin, once seen as a potential future top leader of Umno, has somewhat fizzled out after an explosive start.

Topping the vice presidency race in 1993 with the highest votes, Muhyiddin was then part of the Anwar-led Wawasan Team.

However, he got derailed in the 1996 election, coming out sixth in the seven-man race for vice presidency.

This election is his opportunity to get back on the right track to making a comeback to top-level Umno politics. A repeat failure may spell the end of such hopes.

But of all the candidates, Isa is one person many have chosen to underestimate, yet who is capable of rising above expectations.

The last time he pulled off such a stunt was in 1993 when he decided to take on Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik of the then popular Wawasan Team and only lost by 44 votes despite being written off from the start.

Not many expect him to pull through this time around but whatever happens, he will stand tall at the end of the process.

The next candidate, Rais, has proven, time and again, to be an articulator of the Malay agenda. He has an impressive academic background with a PhD in Public Law.

But his eight-year sojourn as Semangat 46 deputy president and his infamous "burning the bridge" remark about his relations with Umno then, are expected to haunt him in his attempt to win the post.

Yet, contesting for the vice presidency post is not an unfamiliar territory for Rais who had vied for the post without fail in the 1981, 1984 and 1987 elections.

Taking a break in the 1993 and 1996 elections, as he was with Semangat then, Rais has now resumed his quest.

In the previous elections, he did not make the mark, but this time around, he is probably hoping for fourth-time lucky.

Last but not the least is Osu. He is not that prominent other than being the Sabah Umno leader who managed to deliver the state to Barisan Nasional in last year's state election.

But a victory in the vice presidency race can lead one to explore beyond conventional political realms.

For one, Osu will be the first Sabahan to reach the ranks of national politics which in turn can be the first step in realising the possibility of an East Malaysian becoming top national leader, including assuming the prime ministership.

Even though it is premature to think of Osu as Umno president material at this stage, the fact remains that the top party post and top national leadership are not peninsula-centric. The nagging question now is whether

Osu has the qualities to play the trail-blazer.

Well, this is how the vice presidency candidates stack up.

The acronym could suddenly change from NGO to NGA or to MGM or MGR ... and the list goes on.

But whatever the acronym, the Umno delegates should know by now whom they want as their second echelon leaders.

Let us hope that they realise that these leaders will also be the leaders of the nation, and not theirs alone.

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