

All abuzz at the division level

Will the Umno divisional polls next month point to changes in the leadership and party rejuvenation? As SA ODAH ELIAS reports some sceptics may think otherwise

IN less than a week Umno's 165 divisions will hold meetings to elect new office bearers and in some cases to reaffirm the existing line ups for another term.

Even the gloomy predictions about the economy has not distracted the incumbent division chiefs and hopefuls from splurging to win support.

This could be seen by the flurry of activities hosted or supported by them but disguised in many forms so as not to run foul of the party's code of ethics.

Non members may wonder what the brouhaha is all about but for most in the party the division elections are no less important than the race for supreme council seats.

Some even argue that the division election is the most crucial because it reaffirms the strength of a leader. This gives credence to the belief in Umno that a leader regardless of his other party or government positions is only accepted as having grassroots support if he heads a division.

Officially many party leaders may pooh pooh this notion but one only needs to look at the list of council members elected last year and the existing Umno leaders who hold

government posts be it at federal or state level to know that this is an accepted perception.

The majority of the council's 45 members including party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and two of its three vice presidents are either division heads or the division heads of Wanita or Umno Youth.

The same is also true of most of the ministers deputy ministers and state exco members from Umno. As for those who are not their names are more likely to be found in the current list of contenders for division's number one post although a few names like Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mohamed Nazri Aziz and Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Dr Shafie Mohd Salleh may be missing from the list because they are said to have successfully negotiated with other leaders in their respective divisions to avoid contests.

The only exception is Datuk Dr Yusof Nor who is 13th in the council according to the number of votes received. The Besut division head and former Umno information chief is the only national level lead-

er who has announced his intention to make way for a newcomer.

Dr Mahathir had said recently that it was not a tradition in Umno that leaders who hold government posts must contest for division posts.

The president might have stated a fact but the reality is all dealings in Umno are always governed by established practices one of which is that a leader must start from the division level.

The few who bypass this practice are always referred to as parachute leaders.

In recent years more and more younger members in Umno have started questioning the practice which they see as a hindrance to the pro-

cess of rejuvenating the party.

Umno Youth Exco member Azimi Daim is among scores of young leaders who do not see the necessity for leaders to hold multiple posts especially if it also includes one that carries heavy responsibility like division head.

He says there is no reason for council members or other national level leaders who secured their posts without winning divisional post to change the situation by contesting this year.

Give others the chance to expose their leadership qualities he said.

Understandably Azimi is quite reluctant to state his stand when it comes to national leaders who are currently division leaders defending their posts.

Others from exercising their rights. What we are saying is if there is no compelling reasons why challenge the incumbents? If it can't be avoided then at least try to confer and negotiate so that a compromise can be reached so that contests can be avoided she explained.

She said democracy must be translated pragmatically which in the context of Umno should be exercised in tandem with the spirit of negotiations and conference.

Otherwise we will have all kinds of mavericks joining in the fray just for the sake of exercising their rights or people who stand for frivolous reasons or just to test the waters. This can't be good for Umno.

for prospective contenders which is incongruous with democratic practices. Why maintain that when the party can abolish all other barriers? he argued.

On his part Azimi took issue with division heads who had overstayed their welcome. Some he said had been hanging on to their posts for more than 30 years remaining entrenched by using dirty tactics and repressing any promising member from rising up the ranks.

In the context of the division election I don't believe that contests will create havoc. In fact it is a healthy exercise to introduce new faces he said.

Azimi was however quick to point out that new faces should not necessarily mean young faces but new blood irrespective of age who could bring in new perspectives which could be blended with established Umno tradition.

The anonymous MP also concurred with Azimi saying that the time has come for the party to review its criteria for leaders or candidates for the general election so that posts would not be monopolised by division leaders.

He said the leadership must make it clear to members that in choosing a leader merit and ability would be the governing factors and not his or her perceived influence at grassroots level.

One MP from Umno who wished to remain anonymous claimed that the practice is at odds with the democratic process and smacks of political patronage adding that this should be totally eradicated if the party is to regain its credibility

The 40 something first term MP is especially irked by the call made by the leadership to avoid contests saying that healthy contests if properly regulated would surely strengthen the party

The problem in Umno is that many mid level leaders either do not understand or do not respect the spirit of democracy That's why any contest almost always results in a split

Advising members to avoid contests is not the way to address this problem That is a wrong signal which is now being used by many of the incumbents to justify their actions however foul as trying to preserve party unity he says

In defending the no contest call Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz says the advice must be accepted in the right context

We are not stopping mem

If it is for the good of the party as a whole what's wrong if we waive this right? she added

She cautioned members that promoting their self interests was not a compelling enough reason to challenge the incumbents

According to her one of the ugly sides of Umno is the yardstick used by many grass root members to determine the effectiveness of a division leader

Instead of judging him on his service track records he was usually evaluated on how successful he had been in getting business opportunities or projects for his supporters or how much money he could spend on them

The same concern was also raised by the MP who calls it the rot in Umno which must be amputated before it totally destroys the party

That is why I am an active proponent of free contest at all levels in the party If we let the majority choose without first putting any barrier that can be abused by those who are already in power I don't think we can do much worse that what is happening today

But first Umno must abolish the nomination percentage

Dr Mahathir has shown that tradition is not sacred in Umno by choosing Datuk Seri Dr Khir Toyo who is not even a division head as the new Selangor Menteri Besar over many other more influential leaders

There is nothing that stops the leadership from using the same approach when it comes to choosing political leaders Everyone knows that in Umno the voting pattern almost always follows the advice from the top leaders

I believe it is still not too late for the leadership to give clear guidelines on what to look for in a good division leader so that delegates will be guided by wisdom rather than self interest or financial gains when they cast their votes next month he added

In the final analysis despite all the talk about restructuring rejuvenating and democratisation in Umno the majority of Umno members may not even raise their eyebrows if most of the incumbents are returned unopposed or get re-elected

To date at least one incumbent Datuk Ibrahim Ali of Pasir Mas has been returned unopposed after all 145 branches nominated him