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Divisional contests warming up in Negri

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THE allegations that Umno aspirants have resorted to dirty tactics, the use of the Quran among them, to win nominations at the branch meetings in Negri Sembilan have taken a backseat to the divisional meetings which begin April 1.

So too have the reports on the corruption case involving a branch chairman and his youth chief in the Teluk Kemang division and the impending Syariah court case involving an aspirant who is eyeing a division top post.

The intensity of the campaigns and contests for the number one post in almost all the divisions this year was expected.

Similarly, it was expected that the climate in the Teluk Kemang and Jelebu divisions would be calm and unruffled.

Ever since Menteri Besar Tan Sri Mohamad Isa Abdul Samad won the number one post in the Teluk Kemang division in 1978 there has not been a contest for the top post in this division, which has 70 branches.

This time, Mohamad Isa, 52, has been returned unopposed with 64 nominations - a number which testifies to his prowess, strength and influence in the division.

But things did not go so effortlessly in Jelebu. Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, the former Parti Melayu Semangat 46 deputy president, had challengers for the top post in Datuk Shamsul Bahari Mat the Negri Sembilan State Executive Councillor and Klawang State Assemblyman and Pertang Assemblyman Razak Mansor.

However, the overwhelming grassroots support for Rais has virtually secured him the divisional chief's post with 40 of the possible 49 nominations. Shamsul Bahari secured six, Razak the remaining three.

This was the second time Shamsul Bahari is contesting for the number one post. In 1998 he lost to Yunus Rahmat, Rais' political secretary, by a mere nine-vote majority.

Rais' comeback was anticipated when Yunus chose not to seek re-election. And judging by his margin and his popularity as Minister and Jelebu Member of Parliament, Rais has won the confidence of both voting members and the grassroots.

A political analyst said Rais, on the national level, is "already a somebody and the contest is to confirm the overwhelming support from the grassroots for him.

"The majority of nominations that went to him also indicate that they want him, as a Minister, to carry out the party's mandate and bring more changes and developments to this part of the State."

Rais, it is said, has been instrumental in getting the Federal Government to approve the RM30 million new road project linking Jalan Seremban-Jalan Bukit Tangga in Jelebu.

He is now pushing for the building of a budget hotel, costing about RM1 million, in Kuala Klawang since there is none there.

The post, no doubt, offers him the firm foundation he needs to consolidate his political comeback.

Having won the Jelebu parliamentary seat again in the 1999 general election, he was appointed by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to his present post in December 1999.

A qualified specialist language teacher, he obtained his LLB (Hons) from Singapore University in 1973. In 1991, he commenced research work for his

degree at King's College, University of London, and graduated with a Ph.D in law in 1994.

Rais has written a number of books on law, politics and Malay customs. His latest work is Zaman Beredar Pesaka Bergilir published last year in Kuala Lumpur.

It is said not a week passes by without the veteran politician, who was the third Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar at the height of his earlier Umno career, returning to his constituency.

Undoubtedly, Jelebu is Rais' heart and soul. And his comeback, said a close aide, is for good.

The main focus in the other divisions will be more on the survival of several leaders who have chosen to go against the very core of the State Umno leadership.

The differences developed prior to the 1999 general election and culminated in disputes over the choice of election candidates and later, the appointment of state executive councillors by the leadership.

The friction among divisional leaders such as the no-nonsense Seremban division chief Datuk Ishak Ismail, 50, and Kuala Pilah division chief Datuk Abu Zahar Nika Ujang and Mohamad Isa over these matters is said to be all but dissipated.

At the centre of the dispute was Datuk Wa'ad Mansor, a Mohamad Isa protege, who upon winning the 1999 general election was reinstated as state executive councillor although he was embroiled in an Anti-Corruption Agency case.

Vehement objections by Ishak, Abu Zahar and others, including State Wanita Umno chief Datuk Napsiah Omar, forced Waad to resign from his executive councillor position and subsequently, the Umno Tampin division chief post.

Whether these "hardcore oppositions in State Umno" will survive is left to be seen.

One potentially explosive contest is the fight for the Seremban chief post between Ishak and state executive councillor Zakaria Nordin.

Can Zakaria wrest the division which has been Ishak's stronghold since 1988?

For now Ishak is leading Zakari with 32 nominations to 27.

In Kuala Pilah, a two-way fight for the division chief post is expected between incumbent and veteran politician Abu Zahar (12 years in the saddle) and State youth chief Ismail Lassim, who is also Senaling State Assemblyman.

Earlier, three other aspirants, including Datuk Hassan Malek (Juasseh State Assemblyman) dropped out of the race following the poor show of support from the grassroots.

The tussle for the division Wanita chief is on between Napsiah who is being challenged by first-term State Executive Councillor, Norhayati Omar, formerly a primary school teacher.

Napsiah, also Kuala Pilah MP, has so far secured 40 nominations while Norhayati has surged ahead with 50 nominations. There are altogether 119 branches in the division.

Based on the number of nominations, it seems that Norhayati could very well turn out to be a 'giant killer' despite this being her first go at a top post.

It is also said that Norhayati is not easily swayed by her critics despite being a newcomer to the political arena.

However, Napsiah's vast experience, contributions to the party and grassroots support cannot be dismissed.

As for the contest for the top post in Jempol, sparks are expected to fly between incumbent State Executive Councillor Datuk Lilah Yasin, who is

leading with 27 nominations, and his rival Deputy Information Minister Datuk Khalid Yunus who has so far received 13 nominations.

There are 51 branches in the division.

And in Tampin, the up-and-coming Tampin MP, Shaziman Abu Mansor, 36, who is also the division's youth chief, is vying for Tampin's number one post left vacant by Waad.

Said to be the rising star in State Umno, Shaziman, who is an engineer by profession, will be taking on more experienced leaders, like acting division chief, Datuk Mohamad Yassin Bakar, who is also Gemas State Assemblyman, and influential division committee member, Datuk Nordin Awal.

Both Mohamad Yassin and Nordin have secured 10 nominations each so far.

As for Rasah, incumbent Datuk Mohamad Hasan, a prominent corporate figure, is being challenged by his deputy, Datuk Wahab Mohd Hanipah, who is also State Umno secretary - a post he's held for six years.

Mohamad, the Cycle & Carriage Asia-Pacific chief executive officer, is leading with 43 nominations while Wahab has received 18 nominations. There are 77 branches in the division.

While there are rumours that Mohamad, the division chief since 1998, is ailing, an aide confirmed that he would be defending his post.

"There is no truth in the claims as Mohamad is hale and hearty. He will continue to serve the party in his present capacity as division chief."

Critics have labelled a few of the aspirants, especially the young blood, as "MB's men".

Mohamad Isa refuted the claims. "If they are indeed my men, then I will go to each and every meeting in support of them ... but my conscience is clear.

"Those who think they are smart and qualified can always contest, regardless of their political connections and achievements. There is no stopping them.

"After all, Umno has always been democratic."

Mohamad Isa has told party leaders and members at the end of each meeting that unity must prevail and everybody must close ranks for the sake of the party.

The inclusion of new blood in the contests such as Shaziman, Norhayati, Ismail and Zakaria, also indicate that party members are more or less ready to include young people in the leadership line-up.