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Intense campaigning in most divisions

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CONTESTS seem unavoidable in more than half of Kedah's 15 divisions. Although there will be no contest for the top post in six divisions, including Kubang Pasu which is headed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, campaigning is intense in many divisions.

This trend is expected to continue until the divisional elections which begin next month as incumbents and challengers alike are aware that the number of nominations they obtain from the branches do not reflect the actual support they will get when delegates go to vote.

The intensity in campaigning is so great that observers said Umno members have forgotten who their most dangerous enemy is.

All are too absorbed in entertaining selected people and going door-to-door campaigning for votes that the doors are left open for Pas to carry on their activities freely to garner support in the past one month.

It looks like only Kuala Kedah division chief Datuk Zakaria Said had heeded the no-contest call for top division posts by Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain when he gave way to the Menteri Besar to lead the division.

But Zakaria who had offered himself for the deputy division chief post is in trouble as he faces strong challenge from the division's former secretary Datuk Abdullah Hasnan Kamaruddin.

Although Syed Razak, who is Kedah liaison committee chairman had repeatedly said his no-contest advice should not be misconstrued as a note of approval for incumbents to overstay, it was made in the hope that the incumbents and aspirants can compromise to avoid further disunity among members.

Besides Dr Mahathir and Syed Razak who are the Kubang Pasu chief and Kuala Kedah deputy chief respectively, the other incumbents who won unopposed are the religious adviser to Dr Mahathir, Datuk Paduka Abdul Hamid Othman (Sik), Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir (Kulim/Bandar Baru), State Housing and Local Government committee chairman Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah (Alor Star) and the political secretary to Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin Datuk Arzmi Hamid (Merbok).

While Dr Mahathir, Syed Razak and Abdul Kadir received nominations from all branches which had held their meetings, Abdul Hamid retained his post because former Sik division chief Datuk Dr Wan Azmi Ariffin, who rejoined Umno early this year, is ineligible to contest as he needs to become a member for three years to enable him to do this.

Ahmad Bashah's challenger, the division's deputy chief Dr Fauzi Abdul Hamid failed to get the minimum nominations, making it an easy win for the former.

Dr Fauzi however is defending his deputy chief post and he is expected to face strong challenge from the division's secretary Hamzah Jasin.

It was also an easy win for Arzmi as his challenger, division Youth chief Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir did not qualify due to insufficient number of nominations from the branches.

Yan division chief Datuk Badaruddin Amiruldin is also likely to be returned unopposed as the division's Youth chief Datuk Shuhaimi Abdullah has yet to decide on taking on Badaruddin.

As for the Kubang Pasu deputy chief post, a strong tussle between incumbent Tan Sri Osman Aroff and vice chief Datuk Saad Man is expected.

Although Syed Razak's no-contest advice had gone unheeded in certain

divisions, efforts are still underway to convince aspirants to compromise.

If this fails, political observers say Syed Razak, who took over as the liaison committee chief soon after he became Menteri Besar in December, 1999, will be deemed unable to command the respect of the division chiefs and senior party members.

Already there are those among the challengers who question his no-contest advice as they feel their divisions badly need young blood.

The old guards on the other hand, refuse to give way despite holding their posts for more than a decade.

"If the Menteri Besar does not want to see contests for fear members will become disunited, than he has to have a formula which not only will satisfy the aspirants but one which can strengthen Umno to face Pas' onslaught," said a former division leader.

Keen contests are expected in Padang Terap, Pokok Sena, Sungai Petani and even Kuala Kedah where there are numerous complaints ranging from money politics and giving treats to improper ways branch meetings are conducted.

Most complaints also have not reached State Umno election management committee probably because "everyone else is doing it".

Padang Terap division chief Datuk Afiffudin Omar, Ahmad Lebai Sudin (Pokok Sena chief) and Che Ibrahim Mustapha are also facing strong challenges.

Afiffudin is facing his deputy Datuk Ghazali Ibrahim, who based on the nominations received and grassroots support, is one formidable challenger.

There will also be a stiff fight between former State Exco member Ahmad Lebai Sudin who lost his Bukit Lada seat to Ismail Kamis from Pas and State Exco member and Tanjong Seri Assemblyman Fadzil Hanafi in Pokok Sena.

Holding a post in the State Government has an advantage to Fadzil since party members believe he will be able to deliver something to the people in Pokok Sena, the parliamentary seat being held by Pas Youth chief Mahfuz Omar and the other State seats including Langgar held by Mohd Shauki Ibrahim, also from Pas.

The Sungai Petani division made a record of sorts when its Teluk Nipah branch chief lodged a police report that he had been assaulted a few hours after the Teluk Nipah branch meeting concluded.

It was understood that Shubki Hussin, 36, had promised certain aspirants to nominate them but did not do so.

Campaigning in Sungai Petani is said to be so keen that members have been split into three factions - under Ibrahim, Pantai Merdeka assemblyman Md Akhair Shafie and Education Ministry parliamentary secretary Datuk Mahadzir Khir.

According to leaders in the division, the contest is expected to be nothing but fiery as all three are going for the number one post.

For Datuk Raja Ariffin Sulaiman who is facing his deputy, State Exco member Datuk Zainol Md Isa to defend his post this time will not be easy because, like Fadzil in Pokok Sena, Zainol has his government post to his advantage.

The tussle for the Jerlun division chief post between incumbent Datuk Hanafi Ramli and his deputy, former State Exco member Abdul Rahman Ariffin is also deemed tough because members in Jerlun are said to prefer the younger leader.

Division vice-chief Abu Hasan Sarif who is the Kota Siputeh assemblyman has also qualified to contest.

Many in Langkawi believe Agriculture Ministry's parliamentary secretary Datuk Abu Bakar Taib will retain his post despite a strong challenge from the division committee member Fadzil Talib.

In Pendang, former Pendang Member of Parliament Datuk Othman Abdul will have a tough time with his challenger, his deputy and Sungai Tiang assemblyman Md Rozai Shapian.

Losing his seat to Pas president Datuk Fadzil Mohd Noor in the last general election probably gives an advantage to Md Rozai.

He appears to be in a better position to represent them as he still rubs shoulders with senior State Government officials.

Mohd Hadzir Ismail will face a straight fight in Padang Serai where he will be challenged by the division committee member Mohd Yusof Harun.