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Mammoth task to restore confidence

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AMID allegations of the role of power brokers, money politics, criminal acts and police and Anti-Corruption Agency reports, all 15 Kedah Umno divisions completed their delegates' meeting on schedule.

The outcome of the meetings spells more trouble ahead for the weakening State Umno as the defeat of some old guards and emergence of new faces as office bearers, including in the Youth and Wanita wings, have put the party in a chaotic state.

Failure of candidates who are in Government as well as assemblymen to be elected has been attributed to political games orchestrated by certain influential individuals.

Such allegations are dangerous. It matters little that there is no proof to substantiate such claims. The rumours that these individuals had the blessings of some top State Umno leaders had caused dissatisfaction and were threatening Kedah Umno's integrity.

"Sanusi's men" (aides of former Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid) - Sungai Tiang Assemblyman Md Rozai Shapian, Md Akhair Shapie (Pantai Merdeka), State Executive Councillor Datuk Md Hassan Bulat (Padang Mat Sirat) - had questioned the delegates' rejection.

Since they had been chosen by the electorate, who included Umno members, in the last general election, they strongly believe their defeat was due to political games played by certain leaders unhappy with their presence.

The defeat of State Religious Affairs Committee chairman Fadzil Hanafi (Tanjong Seri Assemblyman) to incumbent chief and former State Exco member Ahmad Lebai Sudin in Pokok Sena and the inability of former Merbok Youth chief Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir to secure sufficient nominations to contest the No 1 post were said to be the work of invisible hands.

Many believe the infighting in the State Umno will drag on for many months. Some even fear that if no effective measures are taken swiftly by the party leadership, it will continue right until the next general election.

Plans to hold feasts to bring members together, especially those appointed as agents to campaign in the run-up to the divisional elections, will on their own not solve a serious problem like this.

Pas, which already has eight parliamentary seats and 12 state seats, is becoming more appealing to the people of Kedah and may need to do little to win the next general election if Umno does not buck up.

Already, people are making comparisons on the goings-on at Umno divisional meetings and the Pas divisional elections. What is clear to them is that the meetings at 13 of 15 Pas' divisions to elect their leaders were convened without much fuss or any untoward incident. To many, Pas members reflect maturity and an absence of greed and materialism.

Umno elections often reek of bitterness, dirty tricks and vengeance. There is a desperate need to close ranks now. But before that can be done, serious efforts must be undertaken to unite a fragmented State Umno.

"We need more than big feasts to bring us closer. The Umno leadership in Kedah better not close one eye to problems brewing after the divisional elections," said a former committee member of a division who did not seek re-election to concentrate on voluntary work.

He was referring to the proposed feasts Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain had planned as one of the measures to be taken by the State Umno to mend rifts, the result of intense campaigning.

It is hoped that Syed Razak, who is also Kedah Umno chief, will not take his own sweet time to proceed with his idea of conducting a post-mortem to gauge the party's strength and take remedial measures. "We do not expect the divisional elections to cause a major split in the party and the post-mortem will also help the State Umno work out strategies to counter the Opposition for the 2004 general election," he had said after opening the Pokok Sena delegates' meeting at Sekolah Menengah Sains Pokok Sena on April 21.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (Kubang Pasu), his religious adviser Datuk Paduka Abdul Hamid Othman (Sik), Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir (Kulim/Bandar Bharu), State Housing and Local Government Committee chairman Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah (Alor Star) and the political secretary to the Finance Minister Datuk Arzmi Abdul Hamid (Merbok) are the incumbents who won unopposed.

Syed Razak, who was Kuala Kedah deputy chief, is the only new face to have won unopposed after the division's former chief Datuk Zakaria Said gave up the post he had held for the past 15 years for the Menteri Besar.

Six other incumbents managed to defend their post with some having to face a tough fight. They are the parliamentary secretary to the Agriculture Ministry Datuk Abu Bakar Taib (Langkawi), Ahmad Lebai Sudin (Pokok Sena), former parliamentary secretary in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Othman Abdul, former Sungai Petani MP Ibrahim Mustaffa, State Assembly Speaker and former Yan MP Datuk Badaruddin Amiruldin and Deputy Speaker and Padang Serai Assemblyman Mohd Hadzir Ismail (Padang Serai).

Although only four of the 15 divisions saw a change in leadership, three of the new leaders won with slim majorities.

It will not be smooth sailing for some divisions where there is a mixed representation of members of the opposing teams.

Although division chiefs are empowered to appoint the losers as committee members, this move is unrealistic since those who have gone all out to kill their opponents are unlikely to kiss and make up easily.

An example is Kuala Kedah division where Zakaria, using his influence, was able to get all 138 branches to nominate only Syed Razak for the number one post but failed to get elected as the deputy division chief in a four-cornered fight.

The long record of animosity between Zakaria, former division secretary Datuk Abdullah Hasnan Kamaruddin (who was sacked from the post by Zakaria last year) and former division chief Datuk Abu Bakar Rautin Ibrahim produced that backlash when unknown newcomer Ahmad Azman Abdul Manaf won the deputy chief post.

Ahmad Azman must have been more surprised than anyone by the victory.

Zakaria obtained 127 votes, Abdullah Hasnan 129, Mohd Azman, 134 and Abu Bakar obtained 38. It needs little understanding of politics to know just how fragmented the division is.

Bridging the gap in Padang Terap, Pendang, Sungai Petani, Merbok, Baling and even Sik will also be an uphill task.

The Padang Terap division is still in a limbo awaiting an endorsement of its election results by the party's disciplinary board.

Former Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Dr Afiffuddin Omar, still linked by many to jailed former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and who was dropped by Sanusi in the last general election, had complained of irregularities after losing to his deputy Datuk Ghazali Ibrahim on April 21.

Although Ghazali (associated to Sanusi's camp) has a large following, the dissatisfaction among Afiffuddin's staunch supporters is real.

In Kubang Pasu, members became divided as former Menteri Besar Tan Sri

Osman Aroff struggled to retain his deputy chief post in the division following the stiff challenge posed by the Prime Minister's former political secretary Datuk Saad Man.

Speculations were rife that Saad did not to defend his vice chief post, thus opening a chance for the Prime Minister's present political secretary Datuk Johari Baharom to win the post uncontested. This was a case of "you scratch my back and I scratch yours".

Jerlun is perhaps the only division with a new leader which is not expected to encounter much problem as former State Exco member Abdul Rahman Ariffin, who defeated former Exco member and former Tunjang MP Datuk Hanafi Ramli, was the division's vice chief and well-accepted by members.

Restoring the confidence of members and the people in Umno is a mammoth task and can only be achieved if leaders and members work as a team to face the party's real enemy, that is Pas.

This is easier said than done without strong commitment and seriousness at all levels. Kedah Umno must believe that it can prevent the State from becoming the third - after Kelantan and Terengganu - to fall to the Opposition.