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Responsibility of delegates to ensure only able leaders get elected

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THE focus today, where Umno political development is concerned, is Kubang Pasu.

Umno members and party observers alike are eager to hear what party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will have to say when he officiates at the joint opening of Kubang Pasu Umno branch meetings this afternoon.

They are expecting the Prime Minister, who is Kubang Pasu Umno division chief, to deliver his amanat for next month's divisional elections, and provide some kind of guidelines for party members.

Those aspiring for top posts at divisions and the incumbents in Kedah will certainly follow closely Dr Mahathir's speech at the function, scheduled at 3pm at Dewan Jitra in Jitra.

Umno branches nationwide began their annual general meetings on Thursday to prepare for the division meetings. Eight of 130 branches in Kubang Pasu and a handful elsewhere in Kedah had already concluded their meetings.

The message to be delivered by the party president is especially important for State leaders anxious to confirm that the no-contest advice by Menteri Besar Datuk Syed Razak Syed Zain is also what the party leadership wants.

Despite his denial that he had issued specific orders to certain leaders not to contest, some aspirants are unhappy with Syed Razak's repeated calls for no-contests, alleging that he was using his position as the State liaison committee chairman to coerce them to give up their plans to challenge incumbents.

Contests seem to be unavoidable in many divisions in Kedah as some challengers have considerable support from branches which may enable them to obtain the required number of nominations to contest.

This is the case with former State Executive Councillor Datuk Dr Wan Azmi Ariffin who announced recently his comeback to active politics after seven years.

Wan Azmi, who was Sik division chief from 1985 to 1993, said he wanted to challenge incumbent Datuk Abdul Hamid Othman to strengthen Umno's support in Sik to enable Barisan Nasional to wrest seats lost to Pas in the last general election.

Should delegates consider a candidate like Wan Azmi? In cases such as this, the delegates must, with an open mind and sincerity, look at Umno's strength in their areas.

If the party is weak, then the time has come for changes. It might not be easy for some grassroot leaders, after serving a leader for more than a decade, to nominate another but if a new leader promises a brighter future, it has to be done.

While straight fights are likely to be seen in many of Kedah's 15 divisions, in some divisions there are more than two aspirants.

Most of the division chiefs had confirmed they would defend their posts. Only Kuala Kedah division chief Datuk Zakaria Said had confirmed that he would not defend his post to give way to Syed Razak, who is the division's deputy.

Those who get to sit as office-bearers in Umno divisions in Kedah have a big responsibility ahead.

Kedah Barisan Nasional has already lost its two-thirds majority in the State Legislative Assembly and is under serious threat from the

Opposition.

"Those elected by delegates to lead the divisions will be responsible in steering the party to the next general election, which is scheduled for 2004.

"Delegates must bear in mind who they choose ... they have to make sure their candidates are capable of countering Pas attacks.

"Pas has made known its intention to rule Kedah and is way ahead of Umno in terms of organising political activities," said Pokok Sena division committee member Ramli Yunus.

A branch chairman in Alor Star division said weak incumbents should give way to others if they are capable, if not better.

"There is no reason for incumbents to stay if the division is weak," he said.

Sharing his views is Sungai Tiang Assemblyman Md Rozai Shapian, who plans to challenge Pendang division chief Datuk Othman Abdul.

Md Rozai, who is the division vice-chief, said the no-contest advice from the Menteri Besar does not mean that the incumbents can overstay.

In calling on aspirants and incumbents to steer clear of divisive contests, Syed Razak said leaders who cannot provide good service to the party should make way for new leaders.

On Jan 11, after chairing the State Executive Council in Pedu, Syed Razak explained that his no-contest advice for top posts should not be misinterpreted.

He said the sole reason for his advice was to prevent a split in the divisions, with the hope that prospective contenders could come up with some form of compromise with the incumbents.

"But it is still up to the branches to decide; I am not telling the branches not to nominate their candidates.

"What I hope is that contests be avoided so that members can consolidate efforts towards strengthening the party to face challenges from the Opposition," he said.

Should there be contests, delegates will have a big responsibility to ensure only capable leaders are elected.

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