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Speculation over Gua Musang

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IT has been a long time since there was this much excitement in Gua Musang, the small "cowboy" or loggers town in the southernmost part of Kelantan.

The town, which has limestone hills surrounding it, is reverberating with anticipation over the scheduled visit of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on April 7.

There is nothing extraordinary about his programme there - to open the Gua Musang Umno division meeting - and yet the reverberations can be felt as far as Johor.

Speculation is rife and the political grapevine has started tingling overtime.

The reasons are simple.

The Gua Musang Umno is headed by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who used to be Dr Mahathir's equal as a party vice-president, Minister in his Cabinet, main challenger to his presidency, leader of the Opposition and now, present-day ally.

The fact that Dr Mahathir has chosen to open the Gua Musang division meeting over many others is enough to fuel the political minds of many with the idea that there is something more here than meets the eye.

Remarks like those of an aide of Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak on the function stretch the imagination further:

"Dr Mahathir cancelled a function he had agreed to attend in Malacca on that day because of the Gua Musang meeting."

Another political insider said it was not one but actually two functions that the Prime Minister cancelled to be in Gua Musang.

The question which arises is: what is so important about the Gua Musang division?

A political observer points out that it has been a long time since Dr Mahathir opened any Umno division meeting other than the one he leads, Kubang Pasu.

There is also another question which remains unanswered: how did the Gua Musang division come up with the idea to request Dr Mahathir to open its meeting when it is not the trend to extend such an invitation to the party president?

Because of this, political circles cannot help but link the Gua Musang function to something bigger than the mere opening of a division.

But for those who refuse to view Dr Mahathir's visit to Gua Musang as something worthy of speculation argue that it is a natural thing to do.

"Gua Musang is the only parliamentary seat held by Umno in Kelantan. If there are any others, Dr Mahathir would have done the same," said a State Umno leader.

However, to many, such an argument does not hold water. They would much rather believe that the move has a definite bearing on national politics.

A close Tengku Razaleigh aide, Ahmad Shabery Chik, feels no one should read too much into it.

"We can look at it as a continuing effort on the part of Dr Mahathir and Tengku Razaleigh to nurture the seeds of Malay unity which they both planted in 1996," he said.

Ahmad Shabery was referring to the 1996 Malay unity effort between Umno and Semangat 46, the political vehicle led by Tengku Razaleigh.

That year, after almost nine years of political enmity, Dr Mahathir and

Tengku Razaleigh agreed that it was pointless for S46 to continue to fight on the other side of the political divide.

S46 was dissolved and its members rejoined Umno en bloc.

Another former S46 member said that despite the readiness of the leaders to bury the hatchet, that spirit did not transcend down the ranks.

"Some of our members found it difficult to gain admittance to Umno branches and divisions."

To him and many other former S46 members, Dr Mahathir's readiness to open the division of their former president could be viewed as a reaffirmation of a commitment to see all unite within the Umno fold.

It is an open secret within the Umno circle that many former S46 members who failed to get into the Umno branches dealt with their frustration by joining Parti Keadilan Nasional or Pas.

While the number is small, it is enough to do damage in elections.

However, compared with the earlier stages after the 1996 "unification", the assimilation of former S46 members into Umno has been quite smooth.

In fact, the ongoing branch meetings which decide which candidates should lead the divisions have signalled that they do not differentiate between former S46 and Umno members.

Former S46 deputy president Datuk Rais Yatim, for example, received an overwhelming number of nominations, enough to make him the Jelebu division chief unopposed.

Even Ahmad Shabery himself, who is vying for the deputy chief's post in the Kemaman division in Terengganu, secured more than 50 per cent of the branch nominations to qualify for the contest.

The fact that he is working with full-fledged Umno man Ahmad Said who is vying for the division chief's post makes the idea of segregating former S46 and Umno members quite obscure.

These are probably one aspect of the run-up to the Umno divisional elections but the question of whether the process has helped in the regeneration of the party is another.

There have been some casualties along the way.

One is former Deputy Minister Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad who failed to secure enough nominations to defend his Bukit Mertajam division chief's post.

Another is Kuantan Umno division chief Datuk Fauzi Abdul Rahman who was unable to garner enough nominations to defend his post.

This has led to his controversial decision to resign as the State Assemblyman for Beserah.

Fauzi alleges that he was denied the nominations due to money politics and wants the Umno leadership to open its eyes.

This has prompted Dr Mahathir to advise Umno members who fail to secure enough nominations not to cause problems for the party.

In Bachok, the Umno division secretary Mohamed Mat Arif received six stitches after being assaulted with a mobile phone.

These, apart from the never-ending accusations of money politics, are but a few of the hiccups in the run-up to the divisional elections.

Many are quick to point out that Ibrahim and Fauzi failed to make the cut because they are closely linked to sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

As such, observers, too, are looking at the coming Umno elections as a process of "purging" the party of those who are suspected of still having "one foot on the other side" of the political divide.

The next question is how much damage has Umno's image suffered in the eyes of the grassroots in this divisional election run-up.

"The problem with some of the candidates is, instead of trying to offer themselves as the better choice, they chose to go out of their way to prove how unworthy their opponents are.

"These divisional elections should be an exercise for candidates to prove that they are the best choice in their respective divisions to represent Umno to do battle with Pas and Keadilan," said a candidate who refused to be named.

But he is very optimistic of the anticipated contests in the coming divisional elections.

"I find divisions where there are contests to be livelier than those which chose to retain the status quo.

"During the branch meetings, some of the members came up with their diagnosis of how Umno can contain Pas.

"Not all the ideas are workable but the important thing is that there is a sense of participation down the ranks."

Furthermore, contests, he added, provide an air of excitement, anticipation and the need to be part and parcel of the event.

Good for him and his optimism.

If the divisional elections are not exciting enough, Dr Mahathir's visit to Gua Musang should inject more excitement.

The only question is whether the other members and leaders of Umno can handle it.

Well, the faint-hearted should probably take a rest.