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Umno can look forward with optimism but not overconfidence

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THINGS are looking good for Umno especially party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as he savours some comforting developments in the party and country as the year comes to an end.

Within the party, most political observers conclude that Dr Mahathir's grip on Umno is firm.

Dr Mahathir's relationship with his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has never been better.

Since Abdullah or Pak Lah, as he is popularly known, became the deputy president, there has been less talk about factionalism or camps in the party which was so apparent when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was in the seat.

Pak Lah, a veteran who has had his share of disappointments in his political career, has settled in well as deputy to Dr Mahathir.

"There is no intense politicking like before as there are no different camps in the party. No more talk about who's in whose camp or so-and-so belongs to this leader's camp or vice-versa.

"A power struggle between the two top leaders can precipitate infighting at many levels of Umno and nobody wants to have that now. The fact that there is only one camp in Umno under the president has indirectly strengthened the party," said an analyst.

The party's Youth wing is slowly but surely gaining the support of the younger generation and so is Puteri Umno which has progressed much since its formation.

And of course, Wanita Umno is united under its chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

The DAP pullout from the Barisan Alternatif due to Pas' agenda is also seen as a positive sign for the BN. Adding to the occasion is the imminent return of Parti Bersatu Sabah to the Barisan Nasional fold, after 11 years out of the coalition.

At the same time, Pas may lose some of its sympathisers who feel that the party has taken them for a ride as it has yet to come up with its Islamic state concept after being challenged by Dr Mahathir.

All these add up to a good year for Dr Mahathir, one which debunks the speculation of observers who said Umno, which boasts about 2.5 million members, is losing its influence among Malays.

Abroad, Dr Mahathir has earned respect as an articulate and fiery spokesman for developing countries and now for Islamic countries.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Dr Mahathir's foreign policies have improved his image and provided a morale boost for the people.

"Moderation is the order of the day. Following the Sept 11 incident, the people have somehow realised that ideological or religious fundamentalism and extremism in any form has no place in society," said vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Dr Mahathir, said Muhyiddin, has gained much ground on this issue. The people now realise there is no other mature party than Umno. The party's moderate stance in its policies and struggles have put it in good stead.

With these new-found strengths, has Umno regained some of the glory it lost?

Political analysts said Umno may look strong now but it is not out of the woods just yet.

There is talk in Umno circles that some States are facing internal problems especially in the north where Pas is making inroads.

In Kedah, for instance, it is said that Umno members suffer so much from the "Pas phobia" to the extent they squirm when they see anything in green.

It is obvious from the previous election results that there was a decline in support for Umno, although the BN did well by taking three-quarters of the seats in Parliament.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Taib was quick to point out that a lot has changed since 1999.

"Then, there were so many issues which somehow pulled down the party. But not anymore. The party is more united."

"The opposition front has been embroiled in crisis after crisis, many unresolved. Rifts have appeared between the opposition parties."

Another Umno leader said the party's biggest problem is not necessarily Pas but from within Umno itself as there are still leaders who fight among themselves.

Sipitang MP Datuk Yusof Yaakob said this does not bode well for the future as internal bickering and differences among some leaders and members would surely provide ammunition for the opposition.

"I'm not saying that the leadership has not done anything. It has, but can do better. It will take time before results can be felt."

Umno is scheduled to hold its election in 2003. Although many Umno members hate to admit it, overzealous campaigning by members during party elections has always led to disunity.

Candidates vying for party posts particularly those holding positions in the Government, have always been busy campaigning and neglecting official duties.

There have been cases where Umno members worked with opposition party members to bring about the downfall of their rivals in a general election.

Umno leaders should realise that this is not the way to get posts.

A contest for posts could be devastating and the party leadership should not allow such turbulence to erupt.

Tambun division head Datuk Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah said Umno should not take things for granted.

"What happened to the plan to go down to the grassroots to explain various matters to the people personally and directly? They must not forget that efforts to bring leaders closer to the grassroots will definitely consolidate the party."

In fact, Ahmad Husni said, the supreme council's plan to hold meetings in the States has also been scrapped, not that it made much difference as most of the supreme council members preferred to stick to their own cliques rather than meeting the grassroots.

Has there been any positive change in Umno in the last two years? Has Umno done enough to keep in touch with the grassroots?

Has there been an increase in the number of Malays supporting the party since the last election?

These questions beg answers.

A division chief criticised a Menteri Besar, saying it was difficult to seek a meeting with him and it took almost a week before he could get an appointment.

"I discovered that it is hard to meet them. I cannot understand why when I just want them to endorse my son's scholarship programme."

By now, MP for Kinabatangan Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin said Umno leaders must remember that voters are getting wise to the tactics of candidates and representatives visiting them only during an election.

Umno, Ahmad Husni said, must remember that Pas is mobilising whatever

machinery it has to launch an assault against the BN.

A close aide to Pak Lah said both Dr Mahathir and his deputy have visited almost all States.

He added that this would somehow show the people that the leadership now was more on the ground to look into their needs and aspirations.

But another Umno leader was quick to point out that the party's losses to Pas in the last general election was not because Pas was strong.

"They won because Umno was not united. Take Kelantan and Terengganu. There are so many factions there, even the people are confused. During the last election, Umno members in the two States were split."

The year 2002, which is the Year of the Horse according to the Chinese calendar, is expected to be better compared with the past two years in terms of political stability and economic growth.

Perhaps, the first litmus test for Umno will be the coming by-election in Indera Kayangan.

The result of the by-election is crucial for it will send an early signal to Umno whether the people are rallying behind it or otherwise.

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