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A Pas poll creates waves

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FORMER Deputy Minister Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad is in a quandary - his application to transfer his Umno membership to a new branch has not been entertained.

Either he has a great sense of humour or that he is at a loss for words, when asked how he felt over the matter, he grinned and said:

"I do not know whether to laugh or to cry."

The last time he was in the limelight was during the 1999 general election when he was chosen by Umno to contest the Permatang Pauh parliamentary seat against Parti Keadilan Nasional president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

What made the contest interesting was that the seat was formerly held by Dr Wan Azizah's husband, former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Anwar Ibrahim.

To add colour to the whole episode, Ibrahim was considered a personal friend of Anwar and identified by most in Umno as belonging to Anwar's inner circle.

As it turned out, academician-turned-politician Ibrahim was defeated by Dr Wan Azizah and since then, the former had not been much in the political limelight.

But Ibrahim did not abandon Umno.

In fact, he wanted to start all over again and applied to transfer his membership from a branch in Bukit Mertajam to one in Tasik Gelugor.

It has been quite some time now since he made the application but to date, there has been no reply.

Since his former branch had approved his request for transfer and the new branch had not approved his application, Ibrahim is basically, an Umno member in a no-man's land.

Ironically, Ibrahim had, previously served Tasik Gelugor as its Member of Parliament.

But Ibrahim is not the only one who faces such a predicament when it comes to becoming an Umno member or transferring his/her membership.

These problems can only be attributed to inefficiency, paranoia and/or insecurity.

If it is inefficiency, then Umno is definitely in trouble.

Being the leading party in the ruling coalition, its management should be on par with that of the Government, if not better.

But it is doubtful that such problems are due to inefficiency.

The more likely reasons are paranoia and insecurity.

The new branch in Tasik Gelugor may be paranoid about Ibrahim because he was once closely associated with Anwar but given the manner Umno has evolved since the political crisis of 1998, such sentiments seem very misplaced.

Worst would be insecurity, a factor which the Anwar debacle almost proved to be Umno's undoing.

During the political crisis, Umno suddenly discovered quite a large number of the Malay middle-class and intelligentsia were not with them and were supporting the opposition.

It was understandable if these Malays were Umno members and decided to abandon ship because they were idolising Anwar.

However, what was discovered was that the Malay middle-class and intelligentsia were never in Umno in the first place.

This means that they were on the sidelines, waiting for a reason to

brandish their sword against the very party which claimed to have been in the forefront in creating the Malay middle-class and intelligentsia.

And this insecurity had led to attempts to block or recruit new members for fear that they may be a threat to the existing leadership in the future.

But such insecurity is also reflected at the higher level of the party.

A recent online poll by Harakah invited its readers to rate five Umno leaders identified as the most trusted to succeed Dr Mahathir as the Prime Minister.

The five were Umno deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and supreme council member Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

The poll results saw 39.17 per cent of the 3,738 respondents voting for Najib, 18.06 per cent for Muhyiddin, 16.83 per cent for Abdullah, 13.94 per cent for Tengku Razaleigh and 12.01 per cent for Muhammad.

Certain Umno leaders reacted quite strongly to the poll, describing it as a sinister attempt by Pas to pit the Umno leaders against each other.

There is no doubt that there may be some truth to the allegation. After all, Harakah is supposed to serve Pas' interest and that includes ensuring that Umno is always at loggerheads.

However, to feel strongly against the poll will also reflect insecurity among the Umno leaders.

In the first place, the fact that Harakah's poll centred on Umno leaders as the people to succeed Dr Mahathir as the Prime Minister is an acknowledgement by the party newsletter that the country leadership is going to remain in Umno.

That alone should allay whatever paranoia Umno leaders may have about the party's future as even its strongest adversary accepts the reality that Umno has the grip on the nation's leadership.

Secondly, Harakah is a media for Pas members and obviously the respondents are members or those who sympathise with Pas.

That being the case, they will not have a role to play in determining the Umno leadership which in turn will determine the nation's leadership.

Furthermore, the Prime Ministership of Malaysia is not by direct election such as the President of the United States.

On that score, if the Prime Minister is going to be from Umno as established by Harakah itself, then it is going to be Umno members who decide that.

Then on, the considerations of the respondents of the poll will definitely be different than that of Umno members.

To all intents and purposes, the choice of the respondents may even be made on the basis of who among the Umno leaders they felt would be "easy meat" for Pas during the post-Mahathir era.

That established, the next question is why the strong reaction by certain Umno leaders.

While some may not have come forward to express their views, the Umno grapevine was actually tingling over the Harakah poll.

Certain Umno members were unhappy while others were gleeful and these emotions are definitely telling of which leader or camp they support or belong to.

This is actually why the poll, conducted by a Pas newsletter, could suddenly turn into a factor in Umno.

However, looking at the Umno hierarchy, Abdullah's position as the successor to Dr Mahathir seems quite established and this has a lot to do with Dr Mahathir's open endorsement of him.

Najib too seems quite set to be the deputy to Abdullah in the post-

Mahathir era if the voting trend among Umno members shown in the past two party elections persists.

Muhyiddin and Muhammad, though not to be discounted, are not, at least at this stage, likely to figure much in the top two party posts.

At best, both will remain in the number three position where they currently stand.

Tengku Razaleigh, on the other hand, has been keeping a low profile and there is nothing showing that he should even be considered for the number three post when the changes at the top occurs.

But given his historical baggage and the fact that he lost narrowly to Dr Mahathir in the 1987 Umno election for the presidency, none can truly believe and rightly so, that Tengku Razaleigh has given up his ambitions.

Given the scenario, the Umno hierarchy looks quite set and established.

Yet, all these are based on the fact that the assessments are made while Dr Mahathir is still around and that his endorsement for Abdullah had kept other ambitious leaders at bay.

The question is whether these leaders will observe this line-up with which Dr Mahathir seems quite comfortable when the number one vacates his post.

Given the strong reaction to the Harakah poll, it is quite doubtful that the line-up in the post-Mahathir era is going to be as smooth or clear as being depicted.

Talk about a possible challenge for the top post is still quite extensive among Umno members.

At the rate they are talking, it is almost a foregone conclusion that the number two post will definitely have more than one candidate.

It is all this talk that gave credence to the Harakah poll.

Basically, what the poll had done was to encourage all these discussions, which had been held very quietly to echo a mite louder.

Some members have started grinning widely when the poll showed favourable results for the leader of their choice.

That is the level of insecurity some Umno members suffer from, so much so that it had to depend on a poll conducted by their adversary to feel good about themselves.

Likewise, that include those who feel depressed because of the unfavourable results for the leader of their choice.

No wonder, given the jitters suffered by the Umno leaders and members over the Harakah poll, none of the Umno media, online or print, had ever attempted to have its own.

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