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Big tests ahead for Pak Lah and Najib as the chosen ones

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HAS Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed to the next level of succession in the Umno and national hierarchy? Are we about to see yet another smooth transition of the power baton on the national political landscape?

He may have done so when he pointed to Datuk Seri Najib Razak as perhaps the next Deputy Prime Minister when the incumbent gets promoted to Prime Minister in 16 months. Dr Mahathir's first reference to this was when he met Kubang Pasu division leaders on Wednesday.

The Prime Minister referred to it again when he went back to meet Umno faithfuls in Kubang Pasu where he has been Member of Parliament since 1978. Dr Mahathir also heads the Kubang Pasu Umno division.

These remarks triggered fresh debate. Dr Mahathir has already indicated in very clear terms that his present deputy in Umno and Government, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, will succeed him once he steps down next year.

Having done that, Dr Mahathir then proceeded to indicate his preference as the next Deputy Prime Minister. He may not have said it with the same clarity as he did when he named Abdullah as his successor, but not objecting to Najib's promotion is as strong an endorsement as it could be.

These pronouncements since his return from his overseas holidays on Wednesday have increased the political temperature, what with the respective parliamentary and State by-elections in Pendang and Anak Bukit in Kedah in less than two weeks.

While Dr Mahathir's first reference to Najib as the next Deputy Prime Minister may have made many wonder whether he was serious or otherwise, his second reference is seen to be more definite and less tentative. It sounded firmer and sure.

But, of course, there was a qualifier to it. As Dr Mahathir rightly pointed out, the final decision as to who should be the deputy lies entirely with Abdullah as indeed the choice of Deputy Prime Minister is the sole prerogative of the Prime Minister.

All eyes are now on Abdullah and Najib. Umno's political circle is fully aware of the relationship between these two favourite sons, thus making the debate on the issue long and deep. It is no longer a secret that when Abdullah was made Deputy Prime Minister in 1999, Najib, who was the most senior Umno vice-president then, was not very pleased to say the least.

The coming together of these two hugely popular leaders, if and when it takes place, will make many Umno members happy. Not only would it be seen as a consolidation effort of the party at the top, it would avoid a possible split in the most important component of the BN.

Whether or not Umno and the country will see the coming together of Abdullah and Najib would partly depend on them, and their supporters. We have seen how the political ambition and careers of good leaders with bright potential being compromised by their own hasty selves and the over-zealousness of their aides, advisers and other behind-the-scene promoters.

If Abdullah were to pick Najib to be his number two in Government, then he would certainly have given sufficient thought to the choice of Umno delegates when voting in their vice-presidents. Najib is the most senior vice-president, followed by Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, the former Selangor Menteri Besar, and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs and one time Johor Menteri Besar.

Many did not expect Dr Mahathir to even hint, let alone indicate his qualified preference of Najib as Abdullah's number two. Najib himself said

so, which prompted the question why?

One can only hazard a guess. Perhaps Dr Mahathir wanted to prepare the minds of Umno members and the nation that the question of party and national hierarchy had always been foremost in his mind. Having set his date of retirement, he may want to ensure that the issue of succession be settled early and effectively.

It may look simple and straightforward to many, but the political players may have their own considerations. Whatever they may be, I know they will have the interest of the nation at heart.

Abdullah seems set to be the next Prime Minister; Najib too appears to be heading for the number two post. Only God's executive powers and their own self-belief stand in the way.