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Business as usual in Umno politics

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THE editors of Harakah must be having a lot of fun. If not, they wouldn't have launched the second round of an Internet poll on whom its readers feel is most trusted to succeed Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as the Prime Minister. The first round of the Internet poll started on March 8.

Respondents were supposed to choose whom they trusted most to succeed Dr Mahathir and the candidates were Deputy Umno president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, vice-presidents Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and supreme council member Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah.

The first round showed Najib topping the list followed by Muhyiddin. Abdullah came third, then Razaleigh and finally Muhammad. It seems the second round of the poll, which started on April 2, also showed a similar trend.

Harakah editor Zulkifli Sulong, when asked about the poll, said: "As Harakah is the mouthpiece of PAS, most of the respondents are more aligned to PAS. Whether the Umno members like it or not, this is what our respondents have chosen."

Actually, what Zulkifli said should be the main consideration among Umno members and leaders in dealing with the Harakah online poll. The respondents can be safely said to be those aligned to PAS. As such, their views will be that which are moulded according to the party's political thoughts.

Furthermore, as stated before, the nation's political system does not have a direct election for the Prime Minister. The person who assumes the Prime Minister's post is usually the leader of the political party which has the highest number of seats in Parliament. That is the reason why all four prime ministers of the country had always been the president of Umno.

In short, it is Umno members and not PAS members who decide the Prime Minister of the country, until and unless PAS becomes the leading party in Parliament. And even then, it has to have the support and confidence of other parties.

Despite all these, some Umno members have decided to use the Harakah poll as an opportunity to start speculating and promoting the idea that Najib should take on Abdullah when Dr Mahathir relinquishes the post and passes it on to Abdullah.

No doubt, nothing is certain in politics and Abdullah need not necessarily succeed Dr Mahathir despite the assurance of the latter that he wants such a succession.

Going on the premise that barring any unforeseen circumstances, Abdullah is going to succeed Dr Mahathir, this idea of how the succession should be supported by Najib himself.

Najib has publicly declared that he supports Abdullah as the one to take over from Dr Mahathir when the leadership baton is passed down. Najib's sentiments are shared by other Umno leaders including Muhyiddin, Muhammad and Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

However, all this support for Abdullah has not stopped Umno leaders further down the ranks from speculating and promoting the idea of a contest for the party's top posts.

For all intents and purposes, observers of Umno politics believe the interest in contests for the top posts is a reflection that the party is regaining its strength, which was much affected after the 1998 crisis.

One said: "Every time Umno members feel that their party is strong, they start scrambling for positions, or at least promote the idea of contests for the top posts. It is, after all, something that gives them a sense of purpose, a sense of importance and an opportunity to participate."

Such views are not far from the truth. However, much as the interest in party contests and elections is a reflection of a stronger Umno, the outcome of such indulgence can very well lead the party back to its weak position.

Another reason why mid-level leaders are keen for contests for the top posts is simply because it gives them the opportunity to hold contenders to ransom. It gives them the opportunity to threaten, demand and insist top leaders do favours in cash or kind. Those who refuse to play ball end up without the votes.

If all contenders decide to collectively ignore such demands from the power brokers, the problem will not be a problem anymore. However, as in any mass political movement, the good guys tend to be the victim.

And in the tradition of politics, losers are truly vanquished and forgotten and the victors are glorified and promoted. In fact, contests for top party posts have always been the main contributor to money politics in Umno and despite the many attempts by the leadership to eliminate the money politics hydra, it is still prevalent in the party.

That being the case, it is not surprising that the Umno hierarchy is tingling with the idea of contests for the top posts. It does not seem to matter if these members derive the excitement even from Harakah, the very newsletter out to destroy their existence.

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