

07/07/2002

Let wise heads prevail

Shamsul Akmar

IS the RAHMAN theory falling into place? The theory, which has been making its rounds for some years now, is based on the name of the first Prime Minister, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Taking the first letter in Tunku's name and that of subsequent Prime Ministers - Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn and now Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - it does seem as if the RAHMAN theory has some credence.

Now, with Dr Mahathir naming Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi his successor and hinting that Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak be considered for the post of deputy, the RAHMAN theory, some might say, looks to be on track.

With or without the RAHMAN theory however, the history of succession in Umno, which determines the nation's leadership, is almost impeccable.

Although there have never been set-backs to the issue of succession to the Umno presidency and the Prime Ministership nor power struggles, the same cannot be said of the deputy's posts for both.

Barisan Nasional secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat who, in various capacities served four Prime Ministers and Umno presidents, points out that the succession process for top government and party posts was always smooth.

Two features have ensured this: history and the culture within the party.

According to him, history has shown that in the absence or resignation of the president, the post would be automatically filled by the deputy. This has never been disputed by party members.

"To the community, whatever is decided by party elders is deemed wise. No doubt, you cannot get 100 per cent ... but it is safe to say the majority will support it.

"To me, this is the case with Pak Lah (Abdullah). Since Dr Mahathir has announced that Pak Lah is going to be his successor, and rightly so because he is deputy president, Umno and the Malay community at large will accept it."

When Tunku announced his resignation, Razak was made acting president and Prime Minister with the endorsement of Umno delegates.

When Razak died, Hussein took over and when he resigned, he named Dr Mahathir as his successor.

What Dr Mahathir has done is merely in keeping with tradition.

The only twist to the whole episode is, unlike his predecessors, Dr Mahathir will only be passing the mantle in 16 months' time despite having named his successor.

A further twist is the hint he dropped, saying that Najib could be chosen as Abdullah's deputy.

To this, Mohamed's son, Datuk Nur Jazlan, who is an Umno Youth exco member, said the 16-month transition period before Abdullah is scheduled to take over may see leaders in the hierarchy trying to position themselves.

"If the supreme council members had allowed Dr Mahathir to finish his speech at the Umno assembly (on June 22), the transition period would have taken a shorter period and a clear transfer of power would have been established.

"Then, it would have been established that Abdullah was the successor and, as the new Prime Minister, it would be his prerogative to name his

deputy."

Mohamed said he believed Dr Mahathir wanted to do what Hussein did, when he passed the baton to him.

"Hussein announced his resignation at the Umno assembly and named Dr Mahathir as his successor. He invited Dr Mahathir to come forward, lifted his hands up and got the delegates to express their support for Dr Mahathir.

"Then, he left it all up to Dr Mahathir to decide who should be his deputy," Mohamed added.

But most things look clearer with hindsight.

For Umno and the nation, now that Dr Mahathir has agreed to continue to lead the party and the country for another 16 months on their pleadings, surely he has a right to express his views, especially with regard to the party hierarchy and whom he thinks should be made deputy.

If Abdullah does take up Dr Mahathir's hint and make Najib his deputy, then it would not at all be surprising.

After all, as pointed out by Umno supreme council member Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Najib, for two terms in a row, had the biggest support among the three Umno vice-presidents in terms of votes.

In the 1996 party elections, Najib topped the vice-presidency ahead of Abdullah and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

Then in the 2000 party elections, Najib again topped the race in the vice-presidency, followed by Muhammad and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Zahid, who was at one time Najib's political secretary, says while all three vice-presidents have their strengths, he believes Dr Mahathir, when hinting that Najib could be Abdullah's deputy, had given it much thought.

"To me, Dr Mahathir is sending a clear signal. He does not want the supporters of the vice-presidents to engage in an intraparty power struggle.

"Furthermore, we wanted Dr Mahathir to stay and lead us because we still need his wisdom. That being the case, why should we doubt his intentions when he made the suggestion?" he argued.

But Umno Youth Exco member Nur Jazlan believes the choice of deputy should be made by the Prime Minister.

"In this case, Abdullah should know who among the three vice-presidents he can best work with."

Mohamed, the BN secretary-general, said Umno history and tradition had never had the top vice-president chosen to be the deputy.

"When Razak took over from Tunku, he chose (Tun) Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman who was then the third vice-president in terms of ranking. When Dr Ismail passed away, Razak chose Hussein, who was also the third vice-president.

"Hussein, too, did the same thing when he chose Dr Mahathir as his deputy. Dr Mahathir was also then the third-ranking vice-president."

In fact, even Dr Mahathir overlooked Najib, who was the top vice-president when he picked Abdullah as his deputy in 1999.

Abdullah then, was the number two vice-president.

Party history reveals that the choice of deputy always creates much discomfort among members.

It is a well-known fact that Hussein, after assuming the Umno presidency and Prime Ministership in 1976, was planning to make supreme council member Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie his deputy.

The rest of the party leadership opposed his plans, urging him to choose his deputy from among the vice-presidents - (Tun) Ghafar Baba, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and Dr Mahathir, in the order of seniority.

When he chose Dr Mahathir, Ghafar, who had been top vice-president then for two terms, was said to have felt slighted (merajuk). He withdrew from active participation in both Government and party.

Interestingly, there appears to be greater sensitivity over the choice of deputies compared to that of presidents and Prime Ministers.

Thus far, Umno has shown a good track record in terms of filling the number two post even though the problem of doing so has always been obvious: there are three vice-presidents and only one deputy's post.

But this has never resulted in a split in the party.

Such a situation would only arise if there is an ambitious number two who cannot wait to be number one.

The bottomline is that Umno members have options - to pick up Dr Mahathir's hint or accept whoever Abdullah later chooses as his deputy.

If they still do not have faith in the wisdom of their elders, then there is the RAHMAN theory which they can pursue.

But should they rely on a theory of coincidence?