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A hot September, SMS, slander and all

By Kalimullah Hassan

IT'S the season of temporary wackiness again. Yes, it's Umno election time. The once in three years when the party's now three million members begin the process to elect their leaders, from the grassroots to the highest levels.

In many divisions, it appears this will be a bumper year for contests, reflecting the "new-found" openness of the Abdullah Ahmad Badawi administration.

It is not that the previous Mahathir administration barred anyone from contesting. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's reign saw some of the biggest contests in Umno's history.

The deputy president's post was contested bitterly four out of seven terms that the former Prime Minister headed Umno. Dr Mahathir himself was challenged in a divisive battle that split the party down the middle in 1987.

But having seen how contests divided the party, Dr Mahathir discouraged them, especially at the highest levels. Given Dr Mahathir's stature and stinging tongue, most Umno members thought twice, maybe thrice, before throwing their hats into the ring, especially at the top levels.

Further, the party constitution was changed under Dr Mahathir to ensure that a candidate could only contest if he received a minimum number of nominations. In the past, all one had to do was secure two nominations and off he was.

The minimum number of nominations to contest the post of president is 30 per cent of the 191 divisions, while for deputy president, it is 20 per cent, for vice-presidents 10 per cent and supreme council seats five per cent. This means an aspirant for the presidency needs nominations from at least 58 divisions, deputy president 39, vice-president 20 and supreme council seat 10.

Mandatory minimum nominations cancelled out frivolous challenges from members with bees in their bonnets and allowed only those with at least some ground support to become candidates.

The same minimum nomination rules apply today and the supreme council has again advocated that there be no contest for the top two posts of president and deputy president.

Abdullah is deputy president and became acting president after Dr Mahathir retired last October. Datuk Seri Najib Razak, whom Abdullah picked as Deputy Prime Minister, is vice-president. Both are seeking endorsement for the top two posts in September.

The only difference this time is that both Abdullah and Najib acknowledge openly that although the supreme council, the party's highest decision-making body, can advise members, the party's adherence to democratic principles will not prohibit divisions from nominating any member for any post.

Following that same principle, Abdullah has said he will allow his own Kepala Batas division to nominate anyone members think deserves to be in the supreme council.

Although some feel that this will impinge on his neutrality because a nomination from his division would seem as an endorsement by him, Abdullah believes that Kepala Batas Umno members have a right, just like other Umno members, to make their choice.

Their views may not necessarily be his, he says, thus precluding anyone

from saying they are "Pak Lah's choice" just because Kepala Batas nominated them.

But the reality is that most, if not all, aspirants are hoping that Abdullah's division nominates them so that they can parade with that invisible badge that says "the Prime Minister's man".

Even if they are not nominated, some may say that Abdullah is secretly backing them. No stops will be pulled to get votes. Past elections have shown that.

There are three reasons, ostensibly, why there could be more contests down the line this time than usual. First, it is the "new democratic mode" in Umno, the new "openness" that allows aspirants to try their luck.

Then, there is the significantly large number of division heads who are not elected but were appointed as pro-tem chairmen when parliamentary constituencies were delineated last year. An Umno division follows the constituency delineation. The once-in-10- years delineation exercise sees existing divisions carved up, resulting in the influx of new branches.

Umno leaders at such affected divisions see this as an opportunity to mount a challenge on the pro-tem chairman, arguing that since the person was appointed, and not elected, members have a democratic right to elect whom they think is best to lead them.

Thirdly, there are many leaders who were dropped as candidates in the general election. Those who are division heads may be challenged by the new Members of Parliament or new assemblymen. Those dropped and not holding the top posts in the division may also mount challenges, just because they are frustrated and angry.

There is a fourth reason, maybe even fifth and sixth. But all these would fall under one category - power.

There will be States where there will be minimal challenges. Like in Negri Sembilan where former top corporate executive Datuk Mohammed Hassan, the new Menteri Besar, has used his tact and diplomacy to avoid divisive contests. It appears that in seven of the eight divisions, there could be no contest. Even in the eighth division, Jelebu, headed by minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, the challenge may be averted through compromise.

But that does not appear the case in Kelantan where the the members always relish a good fight. Sabah, too, promises a battle royale in quite a few divisions.

In Perlis, there will definitely be contests in two out of the three divisions - Kangar and Padang Besar - because both division heads, ministers Datuk Radzi Sheikh Ahmad and Datuk Azmi Khalid, have, in decisions infrequently seen in Umno, made known they will not defend their posts and make way for new blood.

Not all aging or elderly Umno leaders will do that. Their excuse for clinging on to power? "I can still contribute."

In such divisions, perhaps, a contest holds much more meaning.

Then there are also leaders like Terengganu Menteri Besar Datuk Idris Jusoh. Representing the new wave of Umno leaders, Idris worked hard and tough and with Abdullah, the Terengganu Umno head, backing him, achieved what was seen as the impossible - toppling Pas and its president Datuk Seri Hadi Awang in the State.

Idris would have every right to declare that he wants to contest top posts in the Umno supreme council.

But instead, he has said he will concentrate on strengthening Terengganu Umno. He will not campaign but rather let the democratic process go on before he decides whether or not he will accept a candidacy.

Again, not all are like Idris.

The contests in the 191 divisions will provide occasional excitement, especially where the battles are between big personalities.

But what most Umno members and the country will be looking out for would be to see whether anyone will have the daring to challenge Abdullah and Najib, and who will get the most nominations for the three vice-presidents' slots.

Although one never knows in Umno, it is unfathomable that anyone could get more than a few, let alone 58 nominations, to qualify to challenge Abdullah. He has shown his mettle by leading Umno and the Barisan Nasional to its best ever victory in the March general election.

He won back Terengganu from Pas and came within a whisker of defeating the opposition party in its "fortress Kelantan".

The Abdullah-led Umno sent the other Malay opposition party, Keadilan, to the cleaners, leaving them with only one parliamentary seat. His chosen deputy, Najib, has supported Abdullah loyally.

There is no sane reason for anyone to mount a challenge against these two.

In any case, there are no real credible leaders with stature to be considered serious challengers. It would, in any sense, be a futile exercise.

The contest for the vice-presidencies is getting crowded, with more and more leaders expressing interest. But it's not going to be easy to dislodge either of the two incumbents who are immensely popular with the Umno grassroots, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

For the third slot, there are already credible and tested leaders interested, people like Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Ali Rustam, Kelantan's Datuk Mustapa Mohamed and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

The contest for the Umno Youth deputy head's position will be watched with keen interest. Will Khairy Jamaluddin, the young son-in-law of the Prime Minister, contest? He is not saying anything yet, despite pledges of support from several state Umno Youth committees.

Khairy, 28, an Oxford-trained economist, has gained prominence as a good negotiator and strategist in the three years he has been an Umno Youth executive councillor and senior aide to the Prime Minister.

But it is his youth and his relation to Abdullah that are being held against him by his detractors.

While talk and speculation is rife about the coming elections, the knives are already out.

The weapons of an Umno election battle - the poison-pen letters, the newer SMS, the e-mail, the slander at the coffeeshops and warong, the malarkey and the hogwash - are already finding targets.

It will get more intense as September nears.

It is but a small, albeit significant, minority in Umno that stirs the proverbial s\*\*t. This minority runs over anyone in its path. Umno has tried to weed out these vile ones but to little effect. They have become a loathed but unavoidable part of Umno politics.

After the results are announced, the winners and losers will, predictably, hug and cry, promising to remain united.

It will be a touching moment and even the bystanders will shed a tear or two. For the next three years, inconceivable as it may sound, Umno will close ranks and woe befall anyone who tries to pit one against another.

Until the next season, that is.

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