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Delegates to decide Ku Li's political career

By Ahmad A. Talib

POLITICS is the flavour of the month. Again, that is. In fact, for the better part of the first half of the year, politics has been the main item on the national daily diet, starting with the March general election.

After the awesome victory by Barisan Nasional, the focus has now shifted to the Umno elections set for September.

While the battle lines are not yet fully drawn, one can safely assume that a lot of groundwork is going on. The on-going divisional meetings could very well set the tone for the annual general assembly which sees the election of office-bearers for the supreme council.

Incumbents and aspirants, or their agents and campaign managers, are working overtime, enlisting support or sizing up their rivals' strengths and weaknesses.

The party election would have been held last year, but the supreme council decided to postpone it so that everyone could concentrate on the general election. The decision has certainly been justified, judging from the overwhelming victory the BN secured, winning 199 seats out of 219. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was given a clear mandate to lead the nation for the next five years.

With that victory in hand, and about two months down the road, Pak Lah will enter the Dewan Merdeka of the Putra World Trade Centre (where the Umno assembly will be held) to stake his claim to the party president's post.

When Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad retired, he handed over the reins of Government and party to Abdullah, who will now seek full endorsement from delegates as Umno's head honcho.

Which leads us to the announcement last Friday by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the MP and division chief from Gua Musang. The one-time treasurer of Umno and Finance Minister has publicly offered himself as a candidate for the post of president, spicing up the atmosphere somewhat. All eyes will now be on the Kelantan prince, who in turn will be keeping his eyes and ears open on developments at the divisional meetings.

Students of political science will have a field day trying to understand the reasons behind Ku Li's announcement. The political pundits have countless theories as to the whos and whys. Everyone is asking one basic question - will Ku Li get the nominations to qualify to contest the number one post?

This follows the party's ruling that any aspirant for the top post must get at least 30 per cent of the nominations from the 191 divisions before he or she can contest. If Tengku Razaleigh fails to reach that number, his hopes of entering the fray will come to naught. While we all know nothing is impossible in politics, Ku Li is fully aware of the realities facing him.

It is always difficult to unseat the incumbent, or in this case, the chosen heir who has his own track record to boast of. And everyone knows it's no mean feat to win the people's mandate the way Pak Lah did.

Whether or not he faces a challenge now rests on the divisions as they nominate their candidates. As most politicians are fond of saying, one's political survival matters more than everything or anyone else's!

Tengku Razaleigh's announcement did not come as complete surprise to some people, as he had earlier hinted that he would not be averse to seeking a senior party post. His announcement just before Friday prayers

appears to have raised more questions from fellow Umno leaders, many of whom seem critical.

Ku Li will no doubt be analysing all statements carefully as he looks for any signs of support, hidden or otherwise. The division chiefs, too, will be scrutinising statements from party leaders as they try to gauge which way the wind is blowing. One thing about Umno politics, though - senior leaders can say what they want or indicate their preferences, but delegates have minds of their own.

Pak Lah has the upper hand (many insist that it's a very firm upper hand); but Ku Li seems undeterred. Unlike 1987, when he fought Dr Mahathir for the presidency and lost by only 47 votes, Ku Li is very much the underdog this time. In fact, he may not even get the nominations to contest.

The 191 divisions would have concluded their meetings by July 22. Ku Li, and all of us, will know by then where he is heading.

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