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Avoid factionalism, Umno members warned

KEPALA BATAS, Sun. - Just days before Umno's 191 divisions begin their annual general meetings to nominate candidates for top posts in the party's triennial polls in September, acting president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi issued the perennial election warning - avoid factionalism or have a weakened party.

Fresh from leading Umno and the Barisan Nasional to their best-ever victory in a general election, three months ago, Abdullah sought to nip in the bud any attempt by disgruntled party members to form camps within the party.

Warning that the existence of different camps would result in infighting and factionalism, Abdullah, who is likely to be unopposed as Umno president, said:

"When there are camps, there will be conflicts. When this happens, all members in the division will become involved. There will be trouble and Umno's unity will be threatened."

Abdullah's comments were apparently timed to remind party members, jubilant over their electoral victory, that splits and disunity would only weaken them. In previous party elections, especially in 1987 and 1993, factionalism and the forming of teams led to acrimonious exchanges and animosity that lingered long after the outcome of the election was settled.

Both Abdullah and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who is Umno vice-president and is expected to win uncontested as deputy president, were in the thick of both the 1987 and 1993 party polls. The first, a failed attempt to unseat then party president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, led to his challenger Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and his supporters forming a separate party called Semangat 46.

Semangat 46 formed an alliance with Pas and the DAP which resulted in Pas winning in Kelantan, a State it still controls although with a wafer-thin majority.

In 1993, then Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim formed the "Vision Team" to oust then deputy president Tun Ghafar Baba and his supporters. They succeeded, but the effects of that battle caused more fissures in the party.

After Anwar was sacked as Deputy Prime Minister in 1998, many of his followers left Umno and formed the Keadilan party which fought Umno in 1999. In a repeat of the 1990 elections, Keadilan backed the DAP and Pas and Umno ended up losing one more State - Terengganu.

While the majority of the Semangat 46 members have re-joined Umno, many Keadilan leaders have also defected and are now either in Umno or quietly supporting it.

Abdullah, in his first election as Prime Minister, led Umno and the BN to a resounding victory, wresting back Terengganu, making vast gains in Kelantan for the party's best showing since 1986, and snaring 90 per cent of the seats in Parliament.

Today, Abdullah, who also heads the Kepala Batas Umno division, said members knew those who had offered to contest divisional posts. The members, he said, could assess aspiring candidates based on merit and decide whether they were best suited to lead.

"Hence, I do not see any reason for setting up camps, as this can lead to conflict among themselves," he said.

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