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## All eyes on race for Umno vice-presidencies

By Zubaidah Abu Bakar

DESPITE the strict rules on campaigning, writes ZUBAIDAH ABU BAKAR, the scramble for posts in Umno seems to have started, notwithstanding the clear sight on keeping a smooth power transition.

UMNO seems to be well on its craggy track towards the party elections, judging from the various interpretations and speculation given to the copious statements concerning its polls outlook.

Although this happens regularly each election year, the decision by the supreme council recently to declare that the president's and deputy president's posts should not be contested still raised many eyebrows.

Given the susceptibility of the situation from this month, when all branches hold their annual general meetings, to the third week of September when the election for the key office-bearers takes place, that statement from the supreme council is being presented with various spins.

The most frequently asked question is: why must the supreme council reaffirm what is already quite clear - that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Razak would be the obvious choices for the top two posts?

Or is there a possibility that there are others keen to vie for the posts?

And since nomination for top party posts is the prerogative of the divisions, is this a directive or merely an advice to toe the line?

These are some questions lingering in the minds of many, including senior party leaders.

Long-serving supreme council member Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah has no qualms making public his opinion despite being involved in the decision-making.

"I am not questioning the decision, for which I am partly responsible," he said.

"The supreme council has the right to make such a decision. But it should be made clear that the divisions are not bound by it. The party constitution says the divisions nominate candidates for the two posts. The supreme council has no such power."

The Kelantan politician was said to have abstained from "voting" (in this case either saying yes or no) when the matter was put to the vote after an hour-long discussion.

It was suspected that a few others in the council had some reservations but did not argue since there was already a majority voice for the endorsement.

Party maverick Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, the MP for Johor Baru, and Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Mohd Ali Rustam, to name a few, were not willing to be drawn into discussion.

Sungai Petani division pro-tem chief and Deputy Education Minister Datuk Mahadzir Mohd Khir politely wriggles his way out of the issue.

"I would rather not say anything. I am just small person in the party," was his response.

But Tambun division pro-tem chief Datuk Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah said it was crystal clear that the two posts should go to Abdullah and Najib.

"The supreme council had only made its stand. It is sort of an advice. The decision should not stop divisions to nominate candidates of their choice but then again why should members question the decision?" said Husni, the Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry.

"There is no need to create unnecessary problems within the party. Umno is already strong and intact."

Husni, however, does not believe there will be divisions nominating names other than Abdullah and Najib for the top two jobs.

"That (the supreme council's decision) reflected the decision of Umno members," was all Jelebu pro-tem division chief and Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim said.

Former Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, who announced the supreme council's decision through a faxed statement to the media a day after it was taken, maintained that the council had only wanted to tell the division that none of the supreme council members was interested in the two posts.

"We do not want to see a situation where people go telling the division that they are campaigning for so and so to contest for the two posts, when in fact, no one among the supreme council members is interested," he explained.

Umno's 191 divisions will hold their meetings from July 8 to 22.

The divisional meetings are significant and will closely be monitored as it is at these meetings that nomination of candidates to hold office at the national level will be made.

The divisions will also decide who will be among the 2,483 delegates that get to attend the 55th Umno general assembly and subsequently hold the right to put the little crosses on the ballots on Sept 23.

The assembly is the time for Abdullah to get the endorsement to lead Umno, the task he had been carrying out with ease since taking over the helm from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad last October.

Having led the Barisan Nasional to its biggest mandate at the 11th general election, his popular commitment to fight corruption and the promotion of Islam Hadhari all add up to the merits that will earn him the party's presidency.

Since Umno's 191 divisions are expected to nominate Abdullah and Najib as party president and deputy president when they meet, the main action is in the vice-presidential race.

Newcomer Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, the MP for Kota Baru and Kota Baru division pro-tem chief, sprang the first surprise, announcing he was prepared to go for the post if he got enough nominations.

Then came Shahrir with his controversial proposal that ministers who fail to win the vice-president's post in the party elections should resign from the Cabinet.

The idea drew a lot of discussion, both within and outside Umno. It even prompted TV3 to conduct an SMS poll to gauge members' support for the idea.

The verdict - almost 70 per cent of the respondents are with Shahrir.

The supreme council, of which Shahrir is a member, however, did not take the matter seriously.

It was not even discussed at its meeting on Tuesday. Senior leaders, including Abdullah, said it was Shahrir's personal view.

But incumbent Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin seemed to take it personally. The Agriculture and Agro-based Industries Minister asked why Shahrir confined his proposal to only contestants eyeing a vice-presidency.

The issue does not affect Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, the other vice-president, but he too does not agree with Shahrir, saying the appointment of Cabinet members is the prerogative of the Prime Minister.

The former Selangor Menteri Besar is Kelana Jaya division pro-tem chief and does not hold any government post.

What then is the general feeling of Umno's three million members, especially at the grassroots?

The list of possible vice-presidential candidates is increasing by the day. Besides Muhyiddin and Muhammad, Mohd Ali, Rais, Kota Tinggi MP and Foreign Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar and Federal Territories Minister Tan Sri Isa Samad have so far confirmed they are interested.

There has been talk that Youth chief and Education Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein might also join the race.

Aside from the race for the vice-presidencies, there is also keen interest in the supreme council's 25 elected posts. Many new MPs and state assemblymen are eyeing the seats.

Since June 1, Umno's 19,232 branches have begun holding their meetings to nominate leaders for their divisions.

And from now until September, the largest Malay-based party will be the focus of interest.

Will there be more surprises?

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