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Ku Li challenge - when will enough be enough?

By Kalimullah Hassan

SO Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah has again decided to pursue his relentless dream that tells him he is destined to lead Umno and Malaysia.

For 23 years, the Gua Musang Member of Parliament has persistently pursued this dream at great cost - to himself but, unfortunately, largely to Umno and the country.

Yesterday, in his constituency in Kelantan, he offered himself for the Umno presidency "because no one else has".

Great. Does that mean that he is the ultimate democrat who wants to give Umno members "a democratic choice?" Or does he mean that in a democracy, there must be challenge to prove that democracy exists?

There must, then, be something wrong with all the other Umno leaders who do not feel compelled to offer themselves for the post. These leaders don't get it, do they?

Tengku Razaleigh's argument is that the Umno presidency is vacant and Umno members must have "a democratic choice" in deciding who fills that vacancy.

He also says that it was at the "requests of Umno grassroots" that he is "offering" himself and that a contest for Umno president will only take place "if" he gets enough nominations.

It all sounds fine. Why should anyone deny Tengku Razaleigh his "democratic right" to offer himself?

No one should.

To offer oneself sounds very magnanimous. But in Umno parlance, everyone knows when one offers himself, what it really means is "hey, I want to contest. Please nominate me".

So let the party begin.

The "Gurkhas" (campaigners in this contest) have found the *raison d'etre* to malign, undermine and divide.

Razaleigh believes in destiny. In the 1970s, Time magazine listed him and Tan Sri Musa Hitam as the men most likely to lead Malaysia in the future.

Musa retired from active politics in 1989 after he lost the Umno deputy presidency and while still remaining a statesman, has refused to be baited by his supporters to be involved in active politics.

But Tengku Razaleigh must have a stronger belief in Time magazine's prediction.

In 1981, when there was a vacancy for both the president's and deputy president's posts after Tun Hussein Onn retired, Razaleigh did not challenge the top post but went for the number two position.

The conventional thinking then was that he accepted Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was unchallenged for Umno president, as the right man for the job.

So, he and Musa fought it out for the deputy presidency. In the run-up, Tengku Razaleigh confidently declared that he would win. He lost and Musa became deputy president and deputy prime minister.

In 1984, there was no vacancy.

But Tengku Razaleigh still felt he had the "support of Umno grassroots" and he challenged Musa again. He lost. Again.

Then in 1985, Musa quit as deputy prime minister after differences with Dr Mahathir. He was replaced by Tun Ghafar Baba. Razaleigh and Musa teamed up in 1987 to challenge Dr Mahathir. There was no vacancy but Razaleigh

felt he had the "support of the grassroots". Musa defended his deputy president's post.

Razaleigh lost, yet again, and this time so did Musa.

But Razaleigh's supporters believed that he should have won, that he still had the support of the grassroots and they challenged the decision in court. They lost. So did Umno. It was declared an unlawful party and de-registered. The country was thrown into uncertainty.

Dr Mahathir set up a new party called New Umno or "Umno Baru" and Razaleigh set up its rival, Semangat 46 (The Spirit of 46), named after the year when the original Umno was formed.

At the first meeting of the Umno Baru pro-tem committee, Dr Mahathir and leaders of the New Umno, which included Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Razak, passed the hat around to collect money for the re-registration process of the New Umno.

Umno Baru had no money, no machinery, no infrastructure and everything had to be rebuilt again. It was a slow and painful process which took several years and in the intervening period, investors shied away because of the uncertainty.

Malays were divided, there was a lot of acrimony and tensions built up as the opposition parties tried to take advantage of the situation.

In the 1990 general election, Razaleigh teamed up with Umno's sworn political enemies, Pas and the DAP, and even managed to entice the Parti Bersatu Sabah, an Umno ally, to desert the Barisan Nasional and fight against it.

Again, Razaleigh confidently told reporters at the old Subang Airport that his opposition alliance would "win" the election.

Again, in the pursuit of democracy, the democratic process proved him wrong. His alliance lost.

Razaleigh only succeeded in ensuring that the BN lost in Sabah and Kelantan.

By 1995, many of Razaleigh's allies had left him to rejoin Umno. That year, in the general election, Spirit of 46 was almost wiped out. Sabah had returned to the BN in 1994 but Kelantan was lost again.

In 1996, Razaleigh made overtures in the interest of unity. Dr Mahathir buried the past and accepted Razaleigh and his sprinkling of supporters back into Umno. Dr Mahathir was magnanimous enough to even make Razaleigh the head of Kelantan Umno, providing him the opportunity to redeem himself by returning Kelantan to the Umno fold.

Unfortunately in the 1999 general election, the Razaleigh-led Kelantan Umno did worse - winning only one Parliament and two State seats in the Gua Musang Parliamentary constituency.

The Kelantan results were blamed on the Anwar Ibrahim issue although Umno won in all the other states except Terengganu, albeit by lesser margins.

In 2000, Razaleigh attempted to contest the Umno deputy presidency which was vacant after Anwar Ibrahim's sacking but attempts to nominate him were futile when his supporters were outvoted at division level.

Abdullah went on to become deputy president when Razaleigh received only two nominations for that post and one for president.

In 2001, Abdullah brokered the PBS' return to the BN. The final links to the Semangat 46 alliance had been severed and both PBS president Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan and his deputy, Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili, grateful to Abdullah and Dr Mahathir, have repeatedly sworn allegiance to the new prime minister.

In 2003, Dr Mahathir retired and Abdullah became prime minister and Umno acting president.

In 2004, Abdullah led Umno and the BN to its best ever victory in a

general election since Independence, winning back Terengganu and almost defeating Pas in Kelantan.

The new team in Kelantan, though appointed by Dr Mahathir, was largely handpicked by Abdullah.

Now in 2004, Razaleigh wants to go for the Umno presidency because "there is a vacancy" and because "the grassroots" want him to.

Phew! Again?

These same grassroots who just slightly less than four months ago backed the Abdullah-led Umno and BN to such a resounding victory have changed their minds so fast? What has happened in these 100 days that they suddenly are pressuring Razaleigh to challenge Abdullah?

We must have all missed it.

But the facts are that vacancy or no vacancy, Tengku Razaleigh has contested or tried to contest the top two posts in Umno every time he could since 1981.

Each time the grassroots have spoken loud and clear.

Tengku Razaleigh should be allowed to contest. But maybe, it is time for him also to ponder this question: when will enough be enough?

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