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Why Razaleigh wants to contest

By Saiful Azhar Abdullah

GUA Musang MP Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah last week offered himself for the post of Umno president in the September party elections. This did not go down well with the party leaders, who felt that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi should not be challenged, particularly as he had led the party to its best-ever electoral victory in the March general election. At a news conference yesterday, after receiving his first nomination for the president's post, Razaleigh talked to SAIFUL AZHAR ABDULLAH, spelling out his reasons for wanting to contest.

Q: You received your first nomination for the president's post today. What does it mean to you?

A: It means a lot to me ...that the people really know their responsibility and they know fully how to use that responsibility.

Q: Are you confident of getting the required number of (58) nominations to qualify for the contest?

A: I leave it to them. I leave it to God. My purpose is just to make everybody realise that in Umno, they have the right to choose our leaders and that the members be allowed to exercise their rights to choose their leaders.

After all, it doesn't happen every day. We must trust our members and I think they will give their best judgment and exercise their rights. And I don't think we should begrudge them.

Q: How do you describe the way campaigns are being conducted now?

A: I don't know. I don't campaign. I don't have a machinery, I have had nothing except for well-wishers and old friends who came to see me, phoned me.

They asked me whether I was going to stand and I said "if they support me I would, and if they don't support me, I put up... (my hands)".

I don't go anywhere. I go to Kuala Lumpur, to my house and back to my office, that's all. I come back to Gua Musang and I don't go anywhere. I don't have the media that some people have.

Q: Did your supporters feel that they were under a great deal of pressure after you made known your decision to contest?

A: Yes. I was told that some who had made plans to nominate me at the divisional meetings decided not to. Some were under pressure. I won't say what the pressures were.

I will talk about this later.

I have sympathy for them. They wanted to exercise their rights within the same party and they had been prevented from doing so.

I don't know why these things happen in this new millennium. We have gone through 11 general elections in the country and Umno, which instituted the democratic form of government in the country. This should be the model.

We should be more democratic than any other institution or any other political party. Why are we not practising democracy in our country. I don't understand.

And my going (for the presidency) is purely to demonstrate that point, that we must allow our members to exercise that right. Winning or losing is another thing.

Q: Exercising your democratic right is one thing but Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has won a very convincing mandate in the general election. So why now?

A: It (my challenge) has nothing to do with it. This is the party election. That's the general election. The mandate is given to Barisan Nasional which we all support, which we all work for. Let's not quarrel about that.

As for him being the leader, he should be congratulated for the victory but it doesn't mean that everything is okay.

Q: Some say the grassroots have made their stand and they have rejected you?

A: Fine. They rejected me, I will accept it. But have they rejected me? Some of my friends have been told not to vote for me, my close friends, you know.

Why is this different standard employed? If I am not popular why should they be afraid? Why should all the newspapers pounce on me? Why? I don't understand.

As I said in my speech (at the opening of the Gua Musang divisional meeting yesterday) just now, I am a leader, a small one.

I am a member of the supreme council. You cannot demean me. After all, I have to still carry the banner of the party. I have to go and defend the party and talk for the party.

I have not gone against anybody. I am offering myself. If the members feel that I am not fit enough, don't support me.

Q: If you cannot contest, how would you contribute to the party?

A: I will contribute in my small way as I have done for the last 42, nearly 43 years.

Q: You have said that you decided to contest due to pressure from certain quarters.

A: There's no pressure. I didn't even discuss my intention with my division.

Q: Are you disappointed that so far you have been nominated only by Gua Musang?

A: It's up to the members. If the members are not willing to support me or are scared to support me, that's their right. I will not be disappointed.

Q: Some suggested that you should have gone for some other post, not the number one post.

A: I can go even for internal auditor's post. I am trying to make a point. I'm going for the president's post so that the people will wake up. Some who don't like me will condemn me. Thank you for it.

Q: Some people say that you are trying to fulfil your ambition to be the Prime Minister.

A: Who said that? Your good friend Kalimullah. I have never said that.

(New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Kalimullah Hassan wrote last Saturday about Razaleigh's previous unsuccessful challenges since 1981 for the deputy president's and president's posts, and that Razaleigh was "pursuing his relentless dream to be leader of Umno and Malaysia".)

Q: Some say a contest would lead to a split in Umno.

A: Nothing has happened and how can you say there's a split?

Q: In your speech you mentioned about ways to improve democracy in Umno. What's the best form of democracy for Umno now?

A: One of the ways to avoid the so-called split is by not having an election for the post of president or deputy president.

We just choose, for example, 100 people or 200 people who can contest and take the first 100, and whoever tops the list becomes the leader. So you keep everybody in.

Under the present system you could be the top contender for the number two post but if you go for the president's post and lose, you lose all because you didn't contest the number two post.

Q: Do you think the nomination requirement should be scrapped because when you made your intention known, you made your people uncomfortable as they have to choose who to support?

A: In life, you always must have a choice. If they make the wrong choice, it is doomed. I spoke to them (divisional members in Gua Musang) yesterday that I am not going to involve anybody, even my own division.

(On the nomination system) I have mentioned already that it should go. We should go back to the system of the old Umno when I fought Dr Mahathir. We only needed one proposer and one seconder and we were eligible.

Why all this campaign to get 58 nominations before you can qualify? It is so restrictive. And definitely those who are not in the position of influence or authority will (not) achieve. As people said I will never get even one.

But thank God, I got one today. But these people (in Gua Musang) are good people, they are loyal to me.

Q: Why didn't you raise this matter (about the nominations) in the supreme council?

A: I am alone. If I voice it out, it's going to be a lone voice.

Q: There are quarters who accuse you of not respecting the no-contest decision made by the supreme council.

A: I respect the supreme council but the supreme council must also respect my rights.

Q: If you fail to get enough nominations to contest, will you offer yourself in the future?

A: Only God knows.

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