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Reviving yesterday's man

By Brendan Pereira

IS Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah still a force in Umno? No, say younger leaders such as Datuk Johari Baharom and Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed. Why then is his name resurrected each time an Umno election is mentioned? BRENDAN PEREIRA analyses.

THERE are two things certain in life: dying and paying taxes. In Malaysia, add another one: Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah's name will be resurrected every time the word "election" is mentioned.

It happened four years ago in the run-up to the Umno elections. Against the backdrop of the ruling party's dismal electoral performance in 1999 and the economic hangover from the currency crisis, there was a push from some of Razaleigh's diehard supporters to get him to challenge for either the Number One or Two position in the party, occupied then by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The personable prince issued a statement early in the campaign saying that if the rank-and-file wanted him to serve, he could not turn his back on them.

His supporters talked about the "snowball effect", where one division would break ranks and nominate him for a top party post leading others to throw off the shackles and follow suit.

It did not happen.

Although they tried in some divisions to get a nomination for him against Abdullah, they were overwhelmingly outvoted.

In the end, Tengku Razaleigh only obtained one nomination for president and two for deputy president. The nominations came from the Tanah Merah division, headed by his loyalist Datuk Hashim Safin, and Pasir Mas, headed by renegade Razaleigh loyalist Datuk Ibrahim Ali, who has since been expelled for life from the party for contesting against it as an independent in the recent March elections.

Today, even Hashim says that people like Abdullah's style of leadership and administration and that Razaleigh should give both Abdullah and his deputy Datuk Seri Najib Razak a chance to prove their mettle.

In 2000, Tengku Razaleigh also received 16 nominations to contest one of the vice-president's positions - but he needed 17 to qualify. Finally, he was appointed a supreme council member by Dr Mahathir.

Four years on, talk of him going for a top party position has revived. The only difference is that in 2000, he was reticent about his political ambitions.

Today, he is fuelling speculation with his own statements.

Here is one of them: "If there are those who feel that I can still serve and contribute to the party, why not? If there are nominations, I will offer myself for a post that suits me."

This statement is being interpreted by some quarters as a "go-ahead-and-nominate-me" signal to the 191 divisions that have started meeting this week.

He only says that he is willing to be nominated for "top positions" in Umno. But his refusal to name the position he is interested in is being interpreted as a sign that he wants to contest the Number One or Two post.

It is common knowledge in Umno circles that Tengku Razaleigh feels that the Umno Supreme Council was wrong in suggesting that Abdullah and his deputy Najib be returned unopposed as party president and deputy president.

Watching and digesting all these nuggets from the sidelines are Umno grassroots leaders - many of whom will form the electoral college that votes in September's party polls.

They believe that Tengku Razaleigh is going to have a tough time convincing divisions to give him even a small fraction of the 58 nominations needed to challenge Abdullah for the top position. Why?

BECAUSE the party is on the upswing.

Abdullah has just led the Barisan Nasional to its most impressive electoral performance in history. The ruling coalition controls 90 per cent of Parliament, has wrested control of Terengganu and has emerged as a serious challenger to Pas in Kelantan after years of being an also-ran.

Datuk Johari Baharom, MP for Kubang Pasu, said: "After many years, people have started to respect and believe in Umno again. Most of the party members on the ground like this feeling.

"Nobody is going to upset this position."

During the branch elections in Kedah, there appeared to be unanimous support for Abdullah and Najib, he noted.

BECAUSE there is a general feeling that Tengku Razaleigh's time has come and gone.

The last time he was in government was 17 years ago, and the last time he was an influential political player was in 1987.

Datuk Nur Jazlan Mohamed, MP for Pulai, put it this way: "There is a new generation of Umno players in positions of influence in the divisions. In their eyes, Ku Li is nothing more than an Umno elder statesman."

Nur Jazlan did not think that any of the 26 divisions in Johor would nominate the prince for any of the senior positions in the party. "It would take a brave or foolish person to propose his name because the division members will not accept it. In 2000, there was a lot of anger because of how well Pas did in the election and frustration at the leadership, yet he could not mount a challenge."

Umno members live and breathe realpolitik. Only leaders who can give them something tangible matter to them. They have little time for nostalgia.

BECAUSE the power brokers in Umno politics are firmly behind the top leadership.

Najib met all the Umno state liaison chiefs recently and they pledged their support to Abdullah and Najib. All of them pledged full support for Abdullah's leadership at last year's Umno assembly, the party's highest decision-making body, and before all 2,000-plus Umno delegates.

Today, when Abdullah returned from a trip to Saudi Arabia, almost all of them, led by Najib, were there to show support for him.

As far as they are concerned, the line of succession has been laid down and they will not uproot it.

BECAUSE the economy is going well.

This is what leading international investment bank Credit Lyonnais SA's chief economist, once a critic of Malaysia's economic policies, says in his latest report:

"There is plenty of evidence to support the view the Prime Minister's policy is reviving the Malaysian economy. The property market is improving, Malaysian consumers are spending and at last, private sector investment appears to be turning the corner.

"Our forecast for domestic demand growth this year, at 7.8 per cent, places Malaysia in the top five performers in the region. There is plenty of steam left in that particular engine. At last, looking very good."

Given this backdrop, why is Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah offering himself?

Because he is being persuaded and pressured from various quarters, he said.

It is unclear who these people are, but it is an open secret that some disgruntled party members are less than enamoured of Abdullah's push for a more transparent style of government.

They hark back for the days of negotiated tenders and the conveyor belt of projects.

They would prefer it if the new administration eased up on corruption and put all this talk about improving the system on the backburner.

What they want is a return to the "good old days".

They are also wounded and hurting after being sidelined before and after the general election in March.

Sitting comfortably in coffee-houses, they talk and plot. They want to strike back at the leadership.

One of them said bluntly: "We would like to send a message to the leadership that they should listen to Umno members before deciding on policy."

Datuk Zambry Abdul Kadir, assemblyman for Pangkor, knows all about these people. He says that they always show up during elections. They love the speculation of contests and the "perks" that come with it.

"The `gurkhas' and supporters are the ones who are always agitating and asking their bosses to contest. They basically want someone to fight their battle."

But very few of them are willing to match the talk on nomination day.

Why?

Because like most Umno members, they only back winners. That's what happened in 2000 and that is what is on the cards this time around too.

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