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The politics of consensus

THERE was a smooth handing over of executive power when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped down as Prime Minister last year. This state of affairs looks likely to be duplicated in Umno, now that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak are expected to win the presidency and deputy presidency unopposed when the party holds its elections in September. This will also reaffirm the uninterrupted link since Independence in 1957 between the top two positions in Umno and the two highest posts in government.

In making the announcement that the Umno supreme council had resolved that the two top posts should be uncontested, party secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob emphasised two things - that it was unanimous and that Abdullah was not party to the decision. The first sends a clear signal to members that none of the senior leaders - and hence the most likely to mount credible challenges for the posts - were going to seek nomination. Combined with the statement by Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who did not attend the meeting because he was in China, that he supported the supreme council's decision, this will be a persuasive argument to win over the Umno grassroots.

In stressing that it was the council's and not Abdullah's decision, Khalil was underlining the fact that the agreement among the senior party leaders was reached without pressure from the top. This will, of course, not stop the anticipated criticism that democracy in Umno is being stifled from above. Such critics should note that, in the first place, the elective principle, a key element in the democratic process, has not been suspended. A formal vote will still be required. Moreover, the "democraticness" of Umno has not been diminished since this representative body has reached a solid consensus about how the president and deputy president should be chosen. The expected intense contests for vice-presidents and supreme council seats show that competitive elections remain a feature of Umno. Consensus-building is as much a part of democracy as selecting leaders through contentious elections.

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