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Support builds for Pak Lah and Najib (HL)

By Zubaidah Bakar; Sarban Singh

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Umno grassroots spoke loud and clear over the weekend and their message was unmistakable: They want Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to lead the party.

All 57 divisions that met today nominated the Prime Minister for the top post in Umno bringing the number of nominations so far to 66.

The support from the divisions today was significant for two reasons.

Firstly, it meant that Abdullah had obtained enough nominations to be eligible to contest the post at the party elections in September. (Candidates who want to contest the party presidency must obtain 58 nominations or 30 per cent of support from the 191 divisions.)

Secondly, the grassroots support which Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah said prompted him to declare on Friday his interest to contest the number one position appeared to be non-existent.

Even the supposed "surprise result" at the Bandar Tun Razak division did not materialise. In the run-up to today's meeting, there was speculation that the division would give the Kelantan prince his first nomination.

But it transpired that the division decided on Thursday that Abdullah and Datuk Seri Najib Razak be nominated for president and deputy president.

Division secretary Zaharin Mohd Yassin said that all along the division was only prepared to nominate Razaleigh for one of the vice-presidents' positions.

"But Tengku Razaleigh is not interested in a vice-president's position, so we did not nominate him," he said.

Zaharin said that people from outside the division had approached him and asked him to nominate Razaleigh for the president's post.

"People thought that as I am close to Tengku Razaleigh, I would use my influence in the division.

"But I chose to leave it to the division," he added.

The trend across the country showed that Umno divisions held to the decision of the supreme council that the president and deputy president's posts be uncontested.

Most divisions will hold their meetings on July 17 and 18, the last weekend before the July 22 deadline.

The Bandar Tun Razak and Batu Gajah divisions nominated Razaleigh to contest against then Umno president Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1987.

Najib, who was also endorsed by the supreme council as the sole candidate for the No. 2 post, also got the support of all 57 divisions which met today.

All six divisions in Penang which met today - Bukit Mertajam, Bayan Baru, Batu Kawan, Bagan, Bukit Gelugor and Tasek Gelugor - nominated Abdullah and Najib.

Bayan Baru division chief Datuk Mohd Zin Omar said the division nominated Abdullah and Najib for the top two positions as they were an excellent combination.

"We don't think this partnership should be separated. There is no need for others," he said.

Penang deputy liaison committee chairman Datuk Seri Dr Hilmi Yahaya reminded Bukit Gelugor division members of the split in 1987 when Razaleigh challenged Dr Mahathir. "We should all recall what happened then. It should serve as a lesson and remind us who we shouldn't support."

Three divisions in Perak - Kuala Kangsar, Tapah and Parit - also gave their nominations to the two leaders. Kuala Kangsar division chief Datuk Ramly Zahari said Umno members should respect the supreme council decision for the two top party posts to be uncontested.

"People will not respect us if we do not follow the decision made by the party leadership," said Ramly.

Nominations for Abdullah and Najib also came from, among others, Padang Terap (Kedah), Rembau, Rasah, Telok Kemang, Jelevu and Jempol (Negri Sembilan), Masjid Tanah, Jasin, Kota Melaka and Tangga Batu (Malacca), Tuaran, Putatan, Penampang, Kalabakan and Tawau (Sabah), and Ampang, Kepong, Seputeh, Lembah Pantai, Setiawangsa and Labuan (FT). Other nominations came from Simpang Renggam, Segamat, Pasir Gudang, Kota Tinggi, Penggerang, Labis, Muar and Semberong in Johor.

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