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Umno polls sees political temperature up

AS the election for party posts in 191 Umno divisions gets under way this month, the political temperature goes up. Prized posts at the party's annual meeting in September beckon. Already, it is clear there is an openness about expression of views not evident the last time around.

There is the usual speculation about whether there will be a contest for the post of party president, even if the speculation on the deputy president's position is not so strong this time around.

This is par for the course as party functionaries jostle for support, deals and trade-offs. If well-managed, it is likely that there will be no challenge.

Of course, there might be the maverick who might challenge against the odds.

Tengku Razaleigh's name has been mentioned. But he is neither a maverick nor someone inclined to challenge against the odds. In 1987, he came pretty damned close to unseating Tun Dr Mahathir.

We do not have the same situation today - and not only because there is no team A and B in Umno. Tengku Razaleigh's political position has waned with time and, as new political forces take hold of Umno, not least in Kelantan, his power base.

The last general election, which was a triumph for Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, showed how Tengku Razaleigh was no longer the political factor he was in Kelantan. In the past, if Umno won in Kelantan against Pas, it was because of Tengku Razaleigh; if it lost (which was most of the time), Tengku Razaleigh would stand out as the only one elected.

At the last election, neither was any longer the case. Actually the Tengku Razaleigh factor in Kelantan is no more. I don't think he should, or will, challenge Abdullah, although it might be useful for him to know he might be appointed to the Supreme Council.

The more credible and interesting developments are the divergent views about competition and challenge at the vice-president level and below. No doubt the profiferation of views - and youthful vigour - may have consequences for future challenges for the top two positions, but for now that's where they are, at the levels below.

Although Datuk Shahrir Samad has been called all sorts of things - maverick, loose cannon - he is no spring chicken at 55. But one has to admire his energy and vigour in propounding his views, and fighting his fight - as against, most famously, the all-mighty Tun Dr Mahathir. He is certainly not faint-hearted.

So his brand - fighting for party vice-president without ministerial position and with no state colouration - is not a lot of hot air that will go off in a puff. There is an argument to be made, and to be engaged, which would enliven the campaign.

Another interesting sub-plot is the strong difference of view between Wanita stalwarts, led by Datuk Paduka Rafidah Aziz, and Puteri pretenders, led by Datuk Azalina Othman, over whether outgoing Puteris should stand for Wanita posts as they come in. It is difficult to see how they can be precluded or excluded, not only as they cannot be denied support, but also, as we can see in the corporate sector, there is a generational change taking place, which cannot be avoided, even if it can be tempered.

So watch this space!

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