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Pro-tem committees are an opportunity for re-generation

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PERLIS Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim claimed he had been threatened by certain quarters that his position would be in jeopardy after October.

As the days draw closer, October has truly become the cut-off month for political change and decision-making.

The anticipation is definitely not confined to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's impending resignation as Prime Minister and Umno president and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's takeover of the posts.

It is not just Shahidan who feels the heat, but others in Umno too, who perhaps may feel that their political fortune was determined by Dr Mahathir or that they had never been favoured by Abdullah.

It is surprising then that Shahidan should publicise the political threat he received, for such things are only to be expected by politicians, a point not missed by a cartoon strip in a local Malay daily.

A divisional Umno leader said the effect of a leadership change at the top level would definitely trickle down the ranks.

"It is a matter of time ...members would start assessing who they want to lead them at the branch and divisional levels once there is a change at the top," he said.

"It works in two ways.

"Once Pak Lah (Abdullah) takes over, those viewed as being close to him may be favoured. Alternatively, those who feel they are close to Pak Lah would then style themselves as candidates to take over from the existing ones."

However, these changes may come before the transfer of power from Dr Mahathir to Abdullah.

Already, there is a proposal that all 165 divisions throughout the country, except for Sarawak where Umno has not ventured into, will be dissolved and replaced with pro-tem committees. The supreme council will decide on this proposal.

There would be 25 new divisions, which owe their existence to the recent re-delineation of parliamentary boundaries. It is an Umno tradition that divisions are created alongside the parliamentary boundaries, so there would be 190 Umno pro-tem committees when the whole exercise is concluded.

The exercise would affect all levels of the Umno divisions, including the Pemuda, Wanita and Puteri wings.

The pro-tem status would be shed when the divisions hold their next annual general meeting.

While this is simply an administrative measure, there are several underlying factors that make the process interesting, to say the least.

For one, the reason why it is proposed that all divisions are dissolved and turned into pro-tem committees, instead of just the 25 new divisions, is because the changing boundaries would require the transfer of members and branches from one division to another.

"Let's say the branch where the division leader comes from is transferred to a new division. Surely, the leader should not continue to lead the division as his branch would now be in a different division," Kemaman Umno division deputy chief Ahmad Shabery Chik said.

Another reason is to facilitate preparations for the general election.

"When the leadership at both the supreme council and state levels decide on who are to be in the pro-tem committees, their decisions would

definitely be in tandem with the process of identifying candidates for the general election," Ahmad said.

"New faces appointed to pro-tem committees would be a way to gauge how grassroots Umno members and the general voting population view them."

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Taib said the move to dissolve all existing divisions and turn them into pro-tem committees is not unprecedented.

"We have done it before. However, it would be discussed at length at the supreme council meeting on Thursday," he added.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the party leadership would have to look at the situation in each division, which surely differed one from the other.

"The fact is, there are divisions that have branches that have been moved to another division," he said.

An Umno divisional leader, who requested anonymity, said the setting up of the pro-tem committees would be a good opportunity to make changes in the divisions to remove those who had outlived their usefulness.

"The supreme council and the state liaison chiefs should be working to promote second-liners and other potential leaders to the pro-tem committees with the intention of making them candidates in the next general election," he said.

"Umno has no choice because it missed the boat to make the necessary changes when it promoted the idea of no contests at the supreme council level, which then became the culture at the divisions.

"Since the divisional elections were not used as a means of re-generation, the pro-tem committees could be utilised to achieve this.

"The only question now is whether the top leadership is prepared to take the gamble, given the fact that the general election is not too far away and that the new faces may not have ample time to get a grip on the machinery, which is usually very much in the control of the old hands."

Another Umno observer sees the setting up of the pro-tem committees as an opportunity to test the sincerity of party leaders at all levels.

"Dr Mahathir said he believed that everyone he had appointed should step down when he does in order for Pak Lah to choose his own men. No doubt, the concept applies to the Cabinet and all those appointed, and not elected, to party posts.

"Umno leaders who know that they have been in their positions for too long and do not have fresh ideas to contribute should step aside, and let others take over.

"This would make things easier for Pak Lah when he has to decide on Umno candidates for the next general election," the observer said.

That sounds ideal, and should give the Umno leadership room to manoeuvre.

"If not, the leadership would have difficulties in selecting the candidate of their choice.

"If they choose someone new and not the top divisional leaders, then the former face the possibility of not getting the support of the division.

"Then, Umno leaders would have no choice but to continue fielding the old hands, regardless of whether they are effective or not," the observer added.

Such efforts, said a first-term Umno division leader, need not be applied to all divisions but, rather, on selected ones, perhaps where the divisional leader had lost in the last general election, or had been found to be ineffectual, or had served their constituencies for too many terms.

"It may involve quite a substantial number, but the Umno leadership has to accept the reality that it has to take drastic measures to ensure re-generation, which, in effect, means remaining relevant," he said.

All these, the division leader added, would be made much easier if the divisional leaders themselves volunteered to step down.

"Surely they can read the signs that their popularity within the division has started to diminish.

"Surely too, if they have been around long enough, they would realise that holding on to the divisional post and wanting to be reconsidered as candidates in the election would not help the party's cause.

"Surely then, it would be time to step down and let others continue the struggle," he said.

If what the division leader said is shared by his counterparts, then half of Umno's and Abdullah's problems would be solved.

But things do not work that way in party politics. The root of the problem is actually not difficult to figure out - it is simply because nobody thinks he is deadwood.