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Focus on top Umno Youth post

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THREE years ago, most from the political circle wondered what was it in Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Khir Toyo that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad saw which led to the former being made the Menteri Besar of Selangor.

Some still ponder on it while others are convinced he was the right choice while many still believe that Dr Mahathir made a wrong choice.

Though debates as to whether he was the right choice or otherwise for the hot post of Menteri Besar of Selangor will persist, the Umno circle is already speculating on his next move, namely vying for the Umno Youth chief post.

The post is currently held by Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, another young Umno leader viewed by many as one to feature quite importantly in the party's future leadership. In more ways than not, the backgrounds of Dr Khir and Hishammuddin are in direct contrast.

If Dr Khir, 38, is the son of a farmer, Hishammuddin, 42, is the son of a Prime Minister.

If Hishammuddin went to the best colleges in the United Kingdom, Dr Khir spent his early education in nondescript places like Tanjung Karang and Sungai Besar and only went metropolitan when he studied dentistry in Universiti Malaya.

In short, if Dr Khir's background is ordinary or even humble, Hishammuddin's is of pedigree and illustrious.

But there is one thing common about them - both were handpicked by Dr Mahathir to assume important positions.

Now it seems that supporters of both are viewing the other suspiciously and that is despite the repeated denials by Dr Khir that he would challenge Hishammuddin for the Youth top job.

"I do not know how many times or how to convince people that I have no plans to challenge Hishammuddin.

"I've said to Hishammuddin himself and also to other Umno members, in private and in public," said Dr Khir.

The next remark was almost expected - "I want to concentrate on the next general election. That is my main concern. This is my first real test in politics.

"If I can deliver Selangor and regain the seats lost to the Opposition, then I have done my job."

Such a reply is almost an echo from Hishammuddin who, when asked about the possibilities of being challenged by Dr Khir said: "It is not the time for speculation. The priority is to concentrate on the coming general election."

Whether the contest will materialise is one aspect of the debate but such talks nonetheless are interesting.

The possibility of a contest arose when Dr Khir won the Malaysian Youth Council presidency unopposed in July last year.

A staunch supporter of Dr Khir said: Isn't it obvious. Why should he go for the MYC post when he already has his hands full dealing with Selangor.

"Surely he sees the MYC as one of the many platforms to spread his influence among the youth and the MYC, being an Umno-friendly movement, apart from the fact that its members are also in Umno Youth, has given Dr Khir an opening to pursue his ambition."

A close aide, however, denied that Dr Khir was trying to use the MYC to

step into Umno Youth.

"Firstly, he is already an Umno Youth exco member with access to all the movement's members. Secondly, he was not even interested in going for the MYC presidency until certain top Umno leaders requested him to do so."

In fact, until the very last minute, Dr Khir was ready not to take up the post if there was a challenger. And as it happened, no one challenged him and he is today the MYC president.

But such replies will not stop the suspicions felt within the Hishammuddin camp of Dr Khir's intention, as became evident when some highlighted the latter's visit to 100 Umno Youth divisions throughout the country in April during their annual general meeting.

To Hishammuddin's supporters, Dr Khir's visit to Umno Youth was akin to what was done by other Umno leaders in the past when they were vying for certain posts.

To this, Dr Khir's reply has been very succinct:

Surely I cannot turn down invitations made by my colleagues in Umno Youth. If I do not accept (their invitations) they will then say that I have become arrogant, and when I accept their invitations, I am accused of trying to spread my influence for the purpose of going for the Umno Youth chief post.

At the rate things are going, the supporters from either camp will only be convinced that Dr Khir is truly not going for the Umno Youth chief post if he refuses to accept nominations next year.

Furthermore, despite Dr Khir's denials, Umno politics has proven in the past that politicians have to change their minds because of circumstances.

And circumstances here can be anything under the sun.

While waiting for the day of reckoning, both Hishammuddin and Dr Khir are actually saddled with huge responsibilities to prove their mettle, which may very well be their capital to defend or challenge the Umno Youth chief post.

Hishammuddin, the Youth and Sports Minister, is hardpressed to prove that the present Umno Youth movement is not a bunch of softies as portrayed by his detractors.

If, during the general election, the Umno Youth is seen as failing to deliver, Hishammuddin's post as the movement's chief will definitely be threatened and that need not necessarily be coming from Dr Khir.

On the other hand, if Umno Youth comes out of the general election with flying colours, Hishammuddin's grip on the post will definitely tighten.

The only problem that Hishammuddin may face is from within his exco ranks.

When Hishammuddin won the Umno Youth chief post uncontested in 2000, he did not get to know who actually were with him or not.

It is different if he had been challenged, then he would have known who is supporting him or his challenger.

He will then, at least be wary of who among the Youth exco members he can trust or otherwise.

Today, some of us believe that the ones undermining his leadership include members of the Umno Youth exco, an Umno observer points out.

While Hishammuddin has his own battles to contend with, Dr Khir is also not in an enviable position.

If he can deliver Selangor for Barisan Nasional in the next general election, win back some, if not all the seats held by the Opposition, his position as the State MB is secured, unless the Umno leadership wants to promote him to other more important posts in the Federal Government. Once he is secure, his path to the Umno Youth chief post is wide open and he can truly give Hishammuddin a run for his money. After all, the Selangor MB post is a very powerful one given the wealth of the state.

However, if Selangor BN performs miserably, Dr Khir can forget his dreams, if he has any, for the Umno Youth chief post as his position as the Selangor MB may also be on the line.

As such, the political direction for both Hishammuddin and Dr Khir depends very much on how they perform in the general election.

But there are several other aspects of their backgrounds which make the political collision, if it materialises, between Hishammuddin and Dr Khir interesting.

Hishammuddin has been known to make efforts to be 'common', attempting to get the common folk in the Umno Youth ranks to be comfortable with him.

On the part of Dr Khir, he has been trying to improve his communication skills and other aspects of his life to allow him to communicate better and be comfortable with the upper levels of society in the course of his duties as the Selangor MB.

Either way, in the pursuit of their political careers, both have to carry the baggage that comes with their backgrounds. As he lives his pedigree status, Hishammuddin realises that he must be in touch with the common folk. Dr Khir, on the other hand, as he climbs the social strata, realises he needs to acquire the finer points in life to be able to style himself as an important political player.

But the one thing he must never do is to forget his humble beginnings.