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No easy choice for Abdullah

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COMPARISONS are odious, so say the wise. It is, therefore, unfair to compare Abdullah with his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It is especially unfair to judge Abdullah when he has only assumed the Prime Ministership less than 48 hours, while Dr Mahathir had been at the helm for 22 years.

Barisan Nasional secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat was quite clear about this:

"Let Abdullah settle down and decide what he needs to do. There is no hurry. After all, we have accepted the fact that the country and party are in good shape."

Much of the attention after the retirement of Dr Mahathir is focused on who, among the Umno leadership, will be Abdullah's choice of Deputy Prime Minister, a prerogative of the Prime Minister.

Within the Umno ranks, there is already much debate on who among the three vice-presidents, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib, will be Abdullah's choice.

Abdullah himself does not seem to reveal anything and that was even noticed by Dr Mahathir himself who, during the last Umno supreme council meeting he chaired on Thursday, said, "He is being very mysterious about it," when asked if Abdullah had confided in him his choice of Deputy Prime Minister.

Keeping cards close to the chest had always been an attribute which had contributed much to Dr Mahathir's political prowess.

However, there are several factions within Umno, though respecting Abdullah's prerogative to be secretive about his choice, which feel that there is an urgency to appoint the Deputy Prime Minister.

Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz had publicly said the appointment should be made soon.

But Mohamed, who had served all four previous Prime Ministers, believes that Abdullah should not be rushed into appointing one and should only do so when he is ready and sure of whom he wants as his second in command.

Supporters of the theory further argued that Dr Mahathir, after removing his then deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998, only appointed Abdullah as the replacement almost four months later.

"But that was under different circumstances as the sacking of Anwar was not something anticipated.

"Now, in the case of Abdullah, he has had 18 months to contemplate his choice since the day Dr Mahathir decided to step down on Oct 31 and hand over the reins to Abdullah.

"Surely during the 18 months Abdullah has been giving the matter much thought and now that the transition is complete, he should be able to make the decision soon," said an Umno leader from Johor.

Some may wonder what relevance does the appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister have on Umno.

After all, as pointed out by Mohamed, the Deputy Prime Minister's post was not a constitutional requirement and was created by the first Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman because he needed Tun Abdul Razak to assist him in the running of the country.

The relevance, said a member of the Umno Youth inner circle, was that the longer Abdullah delayed the appointment of his number two, the more the uncertainties would spread within the party ranks.

"Let us get it over and done with. Once Abdullah has appointed the Deputy Prime Minister, the Umno ranks will stop speculating who will be his choice from among the vice-presidents.

"Then we can start focusing on the general election."

He added that after the general election, the party ranks could start thinking about the party election, and figure out whether they wanted the Deputy Prime Minister to get their endorsement to be the Umno deputy president.

Another Umno leader from Sabah claimed that Abdullah was contemplating not appointing the deputy as he wanted to call for an early election.

"It should be a good test for the potential deputy to prove himself and get the nod after the election is concluded."

But an Umno divisional leader in Kuala Lumpur feels that it is not wise to leave the Deputy Prime Minister's post vacant when Abdullah leads the BN into the general election.

"It creates the perception that Abdullah is unsure of his own leaders within Umno and that they need to go through the election before he can decide."

That, he added, would only cause further division within the ranks.

He admitted that it was not easy for Abdullah to decide who among the three Umno vice-presidents should be the Deputy Prime Minister.

"We have seen what happened when Dr Mahathir chose (Tan Sri) Musa Hitam as the Deputy Prime Minister after he took over the reins from Tun Hussein Onn in 1981.

"In 1983, when the party election was held, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, who was the more senior vice-president (than Musa) challenged Musa for the deputy presidency.

"Then, in the 1987 party election, a year after Musa resigned as Deputy Prime Minister and (Tun) Ghafar Baba was chosen by Dr Mahathir as the replacement, Musa teamed up with Razaleigh to challenge Ghafar and Dr Mahathir for the deputy and the top party posts."

All these, he said, proved that the selection of a Deputy Prime Minister from the ranks of the vice-president might spell disaster for Umno in the long run.

The 1987 party election saw Dr Mahathir and Ghafar holding on to their party posts by the skin of their teeth. And Umno was de-registered, and the splinter Semangat 46 was set up.

But Mohamed dismissed that such possibilities would recur.

"The 1987 episode occurred because there was Team A and Team B. Now there are no teams. All Abdullah needs to do is choose from the three vice-presidents, and even if the one not chosen may feel slighted, the party ranks will not allow the creation of a faction to challenge the leadership."

There have been talks within the political grapevine that Abdullah may choose someone outside the loop of the three vice-presidents, and that Rafidah's name is being bandied.

The argument is that being the Wanita chief automatically makes Rafidah a vice-president and if she is chosen, it would not be breaking the party convention.

Most Umno leaders dismissed this as an option that Abdullah will entertain.

"The Umno convention has shown that only the three vice-presidents should be considered, as attempts to appoint one from outside that loop, as in the case of Hussein for wanting to take in (Tan Sri) Ghazali Shafie as his deputy in 1976, was threatened with an Umno rebellion," said a Selangor Umno leader.

That established, Abdullah's choices have again been narrowed down to

three.

That can be further narrowed down to two, given that Muhammad is considered out of the running as he is not an MP, and is perceived to be best left to serve Umno and not the Government.

With that, Najib and Muhyiddin are the only candidates for Abdullah to consider.

Najib is no doubt seen as the logical choice, as he is the most senior vice-president, and has also been mentioned by Dr Mahathir as a good choice.

However, some quarters within Umno believed that Dr Mahathir has spoken out of turn as the choice should be made by Abdullah as the latter will be the one that has to work with his deputy.

"Surely Abdullah will not want to work with someone he is not comfortable with. So he should be allowed to choose freely," said a party insider.

The question now is, who among of the two - Najib or Muhyiddin - is Abdullah more comfortable with.

But it was pointed out that personal preference should not be the criterion as Abdullah has to think within the context of Umno and national interest.

A "wrong" choice may lead to turmoil within the Umno ranks. But Abdullah, in that sense, does not have much of a choice other than to take his pick and to be damned with it.

To light a candle, rather than curse the darkness, is always a better choice.