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Traditions die hard in Umno, Nazri's views notwithstanding

Ainon Mohd

UMNO supreme council member Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz's personal view in which he openly declared support for Datuk Seri Najib Razak to be made deputy to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who becomes Prime Minister in October has no doubt stirred passions and fuelled speculation.

After the stranglehold Iraq and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) have on national life these days, this issue is probably the third most important news item.

Nazri has since making those remarks, attempted to clarify his original quotes, saying that his division had issued no resolution endorsing Najib as the next Deputy Prime Minister at the Chenderoh division meeting and that he made the statement in his capacity as division head.

But he, nonetheless, reiterated his unwavering preference for Najib.

However, a question that arises is Nazri's true intention or perhaps hidden agenda in raising the successor issue during a political gathering when Umno is preparing for the general election. Surely, he would have weighed all the repercussions before making such a statement.

Although party insiders say Nazri has since explained his true intentions to Abdullah given that this brief episode has unnerved everyone, the incident had no doubt created waves in and outside Umno.

Some party leaders darkly hinted that his intention was to spark a series of declarations by the divisions while some say that Nazri was just being himself - bold and blunt.

Nazri's original remarks hinted at a certain democratic ideal, saying that the grassroots have the right to indicate to the leadership whom they think should be made the next DPM.

However, Umno divisions simply do not name candidates for the post of the next DPM. What Umno divisions do is choose party office bearers.

They last did it in 2000. Naturally what essentially the party delegates do in electing the three VPs is to select a pool of promising personalities that essentially means the party wants them to assist the No 1 and No 2 in carrying out party activities.

Knowing pretty well that such a declaration will do more harm than good, the party leadership has moved in quickly to dissuade others in the party from publicly stating their preferences for the top posts, which to them was not a very inspiring prospect for a party that must first face nationwide polls in a few months.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib said if Nazri's aim was to divert the attention of the people from the Iraq war, then he had indeed managed to do so.

"But this is not a wise move, certainly not as it will encourage others to do the same and in the end the party will take the brunt. What if other divisions nominate other names? This will create factions and unnecessary tension among the Umno members when we are trying to strengthen the party to face the general election," he said.

Sri Gading division head Datuk Mohamad Aziz and Tebrau division head Datuk Mohamad Ali both agreed that the matter should be put to rest.

"We should not prolong this matter as we do not want the Umno members to lose focus. Our main objective should be to go all out and woo support from the people so that we can regain ground which was lost during the 1999 general election. We must not allow internal bickering among the members," said Mohamad Aziz.

Mohamad Ali said such declaration would create factions in Umno and a sense of rivalry which would provide ammunition for the opposition.

"The party should be intact. Maybe the aspiring candidates whoever they may be, don't bicker, but what about their supporters?" he asked.

Many do not expect Abdullah to release a barrage of policy announcements before it is time, given his unassuming nature and deference to the Prime Minister.

Going by this assessment, Abdullah is not going to share with us his thoughts on qualities he looks for in personalities to be appointed as his deputy.

But looking at history, every now and then, one of the three Umno vice-presidents will be appointed by the sitting Prime Minister to be his deputy.

The previous such appointments were that of Tun Hussein Onn (1973) Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (1976), Tun Ghafar Baba (1986), and Abdullah himself (1999). All were subsequently endorsed by the party.

However, Tan Sri Musa Hitam (1981) and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim (1993) won the No 2 post in the party before they were appointed as DPM.

Going by this, the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister is unmistakably the sole prerogative of the PM.

Former Perlis Menteri Besar Tan Sri Hamid Pawan Teh said looking at the country's tradition, the paradigm of choosing the No 2 has not changed so much.

"As always in the past, the No 1 will have the prerogative of choosing the No 2 and I believe this tradition will again be upheld. Other arguments will not hold water as this is stated in the Constitution. To me, any resolution which is against this will break the tradition and dilute the traditional prerogative."

Such an open statement of declaration, he said, would also be perceived as putting pressure on the one who was given the prerogative.

Going by this, the one named by Abdullah as his deputy, will be endorsed by the party if traditions were to be followed.