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Wolf in sheep's clothing could cause problems when the baton is passed

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THE presence of tough-looking young men wearing leather jackets complete with Umno Youth logos on them, caused quite a stir on Tuesday.

It seemed they had taken upon themselves the task of providing security to top Umno leaders to the extent of trying to protect the VIPs from their own security personnel.

It was later established that most of them were Umno Youth members, but not part of the movement's secretariat.

According to an Umno Youth spokesman, the "leather-jacketed" youths wanted to contribute to the party in its on-going general assembly.

"But I guess, it is a case of misplaced noble intentions."

Noble intentions but badly-executed are common and have never been able to affect Umno's stature nor distract the party from its objectives.

It is the well-executed evil intentions which have been the bane of Umno for years no end.

And under most circumstances, the perpetrators of evil intentions are anything but thuggish in their outlook. Their smiles are sweet and their attire befits the occasion.

The Malay proverb probably most apt to describe such individuals is musuh dalam selimut or a wolf in a sheep's clothing (the English equivalent).

As such, it is not surprising that Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad raised the issue of party members challenging his anointed successor Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and the deputy president to be chosen by the latter.

While contests should not be viewed negatively all the time as they ensure that the democratic process in the party is alive and kicking, it is the manner in which some of the contests are being conducted that worries the leadership.

The scenario after Dr Mahathir steps down in October is that Abdullah will take over as Prime Minister and party president.

Abdullah will then appoint an Umno leader of his choice to be the Deputy Prime Minister and by convention, it will be one of the three vice-presidents - Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

Muhammad had been discounted from the very start because he is not a Member of Parliament though he could be made a senator to enable him to be the Deputy Prime Minister.

However, party insiders do not see such a scenario as it can give rise to unhappiness, not necessarily with the other two vice-presidents, but with their supporters.

With that, the contest for the Deputy Prime Minister's post will be left to Najib and Muhyiddin.

Although Dr Mahathir had said that Najib, being the senior vice-president, should be considered for the deputy prime ministership, the prerogative of choosing the person lies with the Prime Minister.

Past situations, when it comes to filling up the Deputy Prime Minister's post, had never taken into consideration whether the vice-president is senior or otherwise.

With that, Muhyiddin too is not truly out of the picture for the coveted post.

At the same time, the appointment to the Deputy Prime Minister's post is

not a matter of debate as it is truly the prerogative of the Prime Minister.

But it is the position of the Umno deputy president which is quite sticky.

After Dr Mahathir steps down and Abdullah takes over in October, the appointment of the Deputy Prime Minister should be smooth.

What is needed for the new Deputy Prime Minister to be "fully legitimised" is the endorsement in the party general assembly next year which is also election year.

What Dr Mahathir and Abdullah had been trying to do this past few days is to seek the support of party members to endorse the new Deputy Prime Minister as the new deputy president.

If the Deputy Prime Minister is challenged and wins in next year's party election, then it is well and fine.

However, if he loses, then the Prime Minister would have to appoint the winner as the Deputy Prime Minister.

No doubt, again, the Prime Minister and party president does not need to change the Deputy Prime Minister even if he loses in the race for the deputy presidency, but it may be tantamount to ignoring the wishes of the Umno delegates.

The other problem that will arise if the Deputy Prime Minister is defeated in the contest for the deputy presidency, is that it may reflect the Umno grassroots' rejection of the choice of the party president.

All this may give rise to complications in Umno's efforts to reduce politicking within.

It is not surprising that Dr Mahathir had expressed his hopes that such power struggle would not materialise.

But looking at what had transpired over the past two decades in Umno, contests for the top two party posts had occurred several times.

Dr Mahathir's choice of Tan Sri Musa Hitam as his Deputy Prime Minister did not automatically guarantee him the deputy presidency.

Musa was challenged twice by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in 1981 and 1983, but the former survived.

Then, in the 1987 party election, a year after Musa gave up his Deputy Prime Minister's post, he failed to defend his party post when the delegates decided to vote for Tun Ghafar Baba who had been chosen by Dr Mahathir to fill the Deputy Prime Minister's post.

Again, in the 1993 party election, Ghafar lost his deputy president's post to Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and with that, went his Deputy Prime Minister's post.

However, since that party election, the top two Umno posts had not seen any contest and when Anwar was removed in 1998 from both the party and government posts, Abdullah became Dr Mahathir's choice to fill the vacuum.

In the party elections of 2000, there was again no contest for the top two posts and Abdullah was "legitimised" as the deputy president.

Now, Dr Mahathir decides to step down and pass the mantle to Abdullah.

Abdullah will have to gain "legitimacy" in next year's party elections and so will the person he chooses as the Deputy Prime Minister.

The only problem is that, despite all the pledges of support for Abdullah in whomever he chooses to be the Deputy Prime Minister and subsequently endorsing him during the party elections, there are still doubts whether such pledges will be upheld.

The thuggish-looking youths with good intentions are said to have shed their leather jacket. But they still look tough.

The question is, what will happen if the reverse were to occur, in which those with evil intentions were to don the leather jackets?

The result will be the same - they will still look noble and sincere,

regardless of what they wear and their evil intentions will only surface when it is a little too late.