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Unequivocal support for Abdullah crucial to Umno's clean-sweep target

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DELEGATES at the three-day Umno 54th annual general assembly made their exit from the Putra World Trade Centre on Saturday evening, tired but satisfied.

They had bid a rousing farewell to their party president of 22 years, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and expressed unequivocal support for his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Many probably headed right home to get a night of well-deserved rest. Some probably had happy dreams of a resurgent Umno which had just accomplished a smooth transition of power, and the glory days that lie ahead.

But yesterday morning they would have awakened to find the question staring back at them: "Well, now what?"

Abdullah will become Umno president and Prime Minister after October, but party members are likely to have to address some pressing issues in the meantime.

One is to deal with the infamous "bad apples" and batu api or inciters in Umno, whose misdeeds can create problems for the incoming party president.

Collectively, these troublemakers are known as musuh dalam selimut, or the enemies within.

Dr Mahathir, in his opening speech at the assembly, warned of the threat posed by such members when he explained how no other party could defeat Umno but Umno itself.

A former newspaper editor once likened the modus operandi of errant and irresponsible party members to the process of cooking satay.

You have the batu api to provide the heat by slandering leaders whom they don't like, and others who act as the tukang kipas or those who fan the flames of anger against the victim.

Umno, with more than three million members, will undoubtedly have a small number of such characters.

But while their number is small, the trouble they can cause for the party due to their mischief can wreak havoc for Umno.

Especially now, a delicate transition period for Abdullah before he becomes the country's Prime Minister and Umno president.

Dr Mahathir, in his closing speech on Saturday, said Umno was capable of making a "clean sweep" in the coming general election - but only if members stuck to their pledge of supporting Abdullah.

The support for Abdullah has been admirable, but there will be a small number who will attempt to curry favour for the wrong reasons.

Their intention will be to lobby for positions, or to ensure they maintain their present ones.

To prevent this, this year's event saw a pledge of support for the person whom Abdullah will be choosing as Deputy Prime Minister, as well as a promise to support the incoming president's decisions on candidates for the next general election.

Vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, one of the two leaders most often cited as being the next Number Two in Umno, repeatedly pledged to support Abdullah's choice and not contest against him.

During his speech before the presidential winding-up on Saturday, Muhyiddin even went so far as to suggest that the presidency of the party not be challenged to maintain unity in Umno.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak, the other potential aspirant said to be in the running for the post, meanwhile took a dig at the party's batu api, who have been privately needling him to contest the post while publicly stating how they would support whomever Abdullah chooses.

"Fight, Datuk Seri, fight," Najib said in mock imitation of their exhortations.

A Kedah Umno veteran, who was with Dr Mahathir during the early days of the party's formation, recalled his advice to Najib about the dangers of infighting in the party.

"I told him he was in a difficult spot; once people start to spread rumours about him wanting the Number Two post in the party, he would be in a very vulnerable position.

"Once people start saying that Najib is out to get the post, he would be 'dead in the water' regardless of whether he is interested in the job or not, because detractors will come out of the woodwork to ruin his reputation.

"As the Malay saying goes, Najib will be faced with the mati dalam kandungan, or 'stillborn', situation."

Problems could also arise if Abdullah himself were to be challenged.

Dr Mahathir, in an interview with Mingguan Malaysia, cited former Kelantan Umno chief Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and former party deputy president Tan Sri Musa Hitam, as the two examples of candidates who would "lose" if they decided to challenge Abdullah for the post of party president.

The duo, though giants in their time, are now widely seen as not being interested in the post, an assumption which both later confirmed when responding to the report.

Some said Dr Mahathir chose former party leaders as an example due to a realisation that naming current ones would aggravate an already difficult situation brought about by all the rumour-mongering going on.

Which is perhaps the situation for Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, who is facing rumours of wanting to go for one of the three party vice-presidents' post in next year's Umno elections.

His denial has been quick and unequivocal.

"Do not pay attention to anyone who tries to predict who will be going for which post, and those who try to pit leaders against each other by their 'predictions'," said Hishammuddin in his reaction to the rumours, front-paged on Saturday by Harian Metro.

The loyalty of party members will be put to the test in the coming year, because along with the party election, Abdullah will lead Umno into the next general election.

The party suffered during the 1999 polls when members loyal to certain leaders got upset that their "bosses" were not chosen as candidates.

The election machinery in the State and parliamentary constituencies in Kedah, along with Terengganu, reportedly froze.

There were reports of party election workers refusing to work, burying posters of candidates, and - worst of all - refusing to vote or voting for Opposition candidates as a sign of protest.

The Barisan Nasional lost Terengganu to the Opposition in the 1999 polls, and Kedah BN suffered a near disaster, when Pas won 12 of the 36 State Assembly seats and eight of the 15 parliamentary constituencies.

Kelantan, which was already an Opposition State to begin with, remained that way.

Voter sentiments following the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim played a role in the situation, but Abdullah has been a tireless worker in trying to rectify the weaknesses in Umno to ensure a reversal of fortune for the three "Malay belt" States.

The attention that he is paying to Terengganu, for instance, is credited as being one of the main factors for the resurgence of the State Umno of late.

Dr Mahathir is also well aware of the danger of factionalism and the damage which it could inflict on Umno in the coming general election.

Which was perhaps why he reminded party members during his closing speech on the importance of supporting the general election candidates approved by Abdullah when he becomes Umno president.

"I suggest that if there is just one candidate, then he should be given due consideration by the party president.

"But if there is more than one, then all parties must declare that whoever is chosen, they will give their support to those selected."

For party delegates who made repeated expressions of support for Abdullah, now is the time to literally put their money where their mouths are.

As Abdullah himself put it in his speech on Saturday, his success as president of Umno would require the support and loyalty of all members.

And as Dr Mahathir emphasised during his closing speech, "if each of us abides by the decision made by the Deputy Prime Minister when he becomes Prime Minister, then our party will remain safe".

For Umno members, their dreams about the future prospects of their rejuvenated party may be happy, but the real work still lies ahead.